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# Post-Intercultural Communication Research: The Ecological Turn and the Humanism-Posthumanism Continuum

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## ABSTRACT

The ecological turn in intercultural communication research understands human environmental degradation as a cultural product, parallel to colonial attitudes. In reaction to this, the ecological turn sees humans as an equal part of nature. This requires a radical disruption of previous thinking, often embodied in post-humanist philosophies. However, posthumanism can also be seen as a continuum to humanism, providing a more consistent framework for the aims of humanism. Humanist research on intercultural communication has always been less concerned with emphasizing the peculiarities of culture and more concerned with how human beings can free themselves from cultural constraints, develop and evolve. Posthumanist thinking pushes culture further aside and opens up to a post-intercultural communication research that explores human potentials and responsibilities in the ecological turn.

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## Introduction: Intercultural Communication Research and the Ecological Turn

The ecological turn in intercultural communication is a response to the rapid pace of climate disruption (Jensen & Auld, 2022, p. 392), and it demands equally rapid responses and changes (Bailey-Charteris, 2024, p. 85). This turn is therefore part of a discourse driven by a sense of urgency which is illustrated by the fact that disruption is the preferred mode of action at the time (Sandford, 2019), and which also spills over into academic work on the subject, where it calls for a fundamental overhaul (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2016). In fact, the human-made degradation of nature is a telling parallel to the long history of human-made colonization and oppression, since both are based on the same sense of superiority of a Western-centred and anthropocentric world (Sommier, 2025, p. 58). Mendoza and Kinefuchi, who were the first to bring the ecological turn to intercultural communication research, conclude that since the ecological crisis is human-made, it must be seen as part of human culture (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2023, p. 581), and therefore to avert this crisis we must change human culture (Kinefuchi, 2020, p. 215). As much as we may agree with this logic, such a terminology, also driven by the urge to disrupt, runs

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the risk of returning to essentialist notions of culture, with their oversimplified view that obscures complex realities. Mendoza and Kinefuchi (2023, p. 577) see intercultural communication research as a central agent in this transformation, but this acclaimed bridge between culture and nature may be a bit too wide, and so it is perhaps no longer surprising that Mendoza and Kinefuchi (2016), pp. 276–277) complain that this relationship is actually barely investigated. When they propose “critical intercultural communication” (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2023, p. 588) as a way forward in this vein, what they seem to have in mind is an opening of the Western discipline of intercultural communication to hitherto marginalized non-Western approaches. And while this does indeed imply a potentially disruptive fight against global power inequalities, the outcome they seek still needs to be described in essentialist terms that imagine cultural transformation as replacing one static culture with another.

Posthumanist philosophies may be able to provide a deeper conception of what an ecological turn can look like, as they promote a comprehensive rethinking of who humans are in relation to their world (Braidotti, 2020, p. 394). This resonates with an understanding of the concept of ecology that takes into account the high complexity of the myriad interrelationships between human beings, the organic and the material world in nature (Kong, 2016, p. 194), which future intercultural communication research would need to acknowledge and cover (Harvey et al., 2022, p. 205). In fact, posthumanist thinking requires a far-reaching reconceptualization of the ontological ramifications of the human being and, in these veins, pleas for this paradigm often join the above-mentioned discourse that sees disruption as the only way to move forward (Lykke, 2023, p. 109). Outside the discipline of intercultural communication research, however, posthumanism is often seen as a continuation of humanism (Herbrechter et al., 2022, p. 15), largely because it pursues similar social goals (Aagaard, 2022). This article takes a philosophical look at modes of implementing the ecological turn in intercultural communication research by understanding research as a continuous discourse that produces rhetorical terminologies that are positioned against each other, based on underlying ideologies and ethical goals. Seen in this light, a “discourse of intercultural communication” (O’Regan & MacDonald, 2007, p. 268) research emerges as a discourse that, in relation to neighbouring disciplines, is characterized by its pursuit of human freedom and development as more important than, or even in contrast to, a meticulous study of culture. The notions of culture in the development of this “‘inter-disciplinary’ discipline” (Monceri, 2022, p. 271) have obviously changed and varied dramatically over the decades and through paradigm shifts, a fact that will be acknowledged throughout this article, and yet, it will be argued, humanist and later posthumanist orientations are and have been a constant underlying ethical orientation through these paradigm shifts. Culture, as a concept in the argument of this article, is therefore always understood as a complement and counterpart to humanism and posthumanism, and this discursive positionality overrides the concrete definitions of culture at any given time or approach. These orientations have brought the discipline to where it is today, and still, this discourse has developed in largely Western philosophies and must therefore be seen as a centrist attempt to overcome these centrisms with the tools that Western philosophies have at their disposal. Seen in this light, this article will argue that the great and necessary strength of posthumanist approaches to intercultural communication research is not

their potential to override discourses on the concept of culture altogether, but to keep alive a permanent emancipation from these discourses, which can be seen as a characteristic burden of Western thought.

While humanist intercultural communication research has sought for ways of how humans can overcome the constraints of these cultures, posthumanism is an attempt to do away with these restrictive cultural concepts from the outset. Applied to intercultural communication research, we can also speak of an era of post-intercultural communication as the flip side of the ecological turn. “Interculturality” then means that humans live and interact beyond and without references to “culturalities.” But at the same time, the theoretical exploration of such scenarios only makes sense as an emancipation from “culturality” which needs to be constantly renewed in theory and in practice, leading to the concept of “post-intercultural” communication. This article traces the rhetorics of continuity and of disruption in this transitional discourse in intercultural communication research towards its ecological turn. It will begin with an exploration of the humanist roots of the discipline, follow its critical debates towards posthumanist approaches, and end with an exploration of the potentials of a post-intercultural communication research.

### Humanist Intercultural Communication Research

Humanism is a philosophy of thought that emerged as a historical period “from the 14th to the 18th century” and in the “time of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment,” when the “invention of printing” led European thinkers to rediscover humanist writings from antiquity (Halimi, 2014, p. 311). Humanism places the human being at the centre, as the point of departure for the exploration of their world, and as the primary objects to be taken care of. This centrality of the human can be traced back to René Descartes’ idea that humans constitute themselves through their own capacity for rational thought, a human exceptionality that was later taken up by Immanuel Kant (Abadía, 2018, p. 170). In the age of modernity, humanism was soon overtaken by scientific-mathematical worldviews, but in the humanities it began a long tradition (Ossewaarde, 2024, pp. 191–192). Until today, humanism is known for its “recognition of the worth of all human beings and their thoughts and actions” which provides the basis for a fundamental optimistic belief that humanity will be able to overcome any environmental or social crisis through its scientific knowledge and progress (Power, 2010, p. 680). Herder’s civilizational-elitist concept of culture can be seen as part of this tradition and is often cited as one of the most important roots of European cultural research (Barnard & Spencer, 2010, p. 170). Edward T. Hall did not simply study cultures, but chose to focus only on those cultural differences that were directly relevant for the communicative interaction of individuals in intercultural contact, resp. for what these individuals perceived as irritating (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990, p. 268). Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s (1952) comprehensive collection of cultural concepts shows how the field at that time is drawn between humanist and objective-scientific orientations, with the latter increasingly prevailing in anthropology (Barnard & Spencer, 2010, p. 173). Clifford Geertz laid the foundation for the interpretive paradigm in intercultural communication research, an approach that emphasizes people’s perception and interpretation of their world, and thus fostered intercultural communication research’s unique orientation among the social science disciplines (Kim, 1988, p. 17).

Martin and Nakayama (1999) single out the critical humanist paradigm in intercultural communication research that “attempt to raise an awareness” of “structures of oppression” (Razzante, 2018, pp. 352–353).

Western humanist thought often argues that the central concepts of academic research do not sufficiently take into account the peculiarities and needs of human beings, and that humanist research must therefore focus on these concepts – an argument that originally had been put forward by Hume (Ossewaarde, 2024, pp. 191–192). Intercultural communication research has been in this tradition from the very beginning. Harris (2012, p. 803) quotes Condon (1974), who, as early as the 1970s, said of intercultural communication research that he was “doubtful that the full study of intercultural communication can be treated entirely as a science.” Human emotions, complexities, and creativity going back to Henri Bergson’s humanist thoughts (Parry, 2003, pp. 101, 106–107) are only some of the most mentioned humanist contributions to doing philosophy about the human. Therefore, it can be said that even the early essentialist approaches to intercultural communication research that saw culture as a boundary to human agency, were designed in a humanist perspective the main aim of which was making humans aware of these observations so that they can develop strategies to overcome or at least best deal with them, and therefore develop and flourish beyond and in spite of culture. Subsequent paradigms in intercultural communication research have continued this orientation.

Porto and Zembylas (2020, p. 357) identify the work of Martha Nussbaum (1998) on intercultural dialogue and humanist education as a fundamental step in the development of intercultural communication theories based on humanist concepts. Additionally Crosbie (2014) elaborates on Nussbaum’s (2011) “capabilities approach,” which sought to highlight the human skills and competences needed for intercultural understanding and to place them in a framework that does not fall prey to the drawbacks of the dominant neoliberal discourse on the subject. The central aim of the concept is to help people secure their well-being and develop (Nussbaum, 2011). Interculturalism puts Nussbaum’s ideas into intercultural practice (Cantle, 2012), and it also continues the humanist tradition in intercultural communication research (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006, p. 481). Nussbaum’s active dialogue approach should encourage people to seek intercultural understanding through hermeneutics, but then to translate this into practical action in the sense of recognition based on humanist ethical grounds. A dialogic and humanist approach should focus on interpersonal relations that connect, rather than the traditional divisive intercultural research on the other that more or less had continued older, culturalist paradigms. In cultural policy, this advance manifested in the replacement of multiculturalism as merely aiming for cultural groups to coexist in splendid isolation with interculturalism as calling for constant interaction and contact between cultural groups to ensure peace and cooperation. This dialogue approach lays the foundation for Michael Byram’s (2008) concept of the intercultural or global citizen in foreign language teaching (Crosbie, 2014). This humanist step gives foreign language teaching a relevance for social development beyond the classroom in that students are not only expected to learn another language but at the same time accept responsibility for cooperatively

engaging in and supporting a complex world (Porto & Zembylas, 2020). According to Henri Giroux, “if citizenship is to be global, it must develop a sense of radical humanism that comprehends social and environmental justice outside of national boundaries” (Guilherme, 2006, p. 166).

### ***Criticism on Humanism in Intercultural Communication Research***

For MacDonald and O’Regan, these active, dialogue-oriented approaches to reaching out to the other go much too far. Indeed, they see in them a totalitarian drive that Derrida has captured in his metaphor of a “politics of presence” (O’Regan & MacDonald, 2007, p. 271), which MacDonald and O’Regan call an “Enlightenment desire for plenitude” (O’Regan & MacDonald, 2007, p. 271), i.e. doing whatever it takes to actually gain control over a given situation, including trying to learn foreign languages. Peters and Besley (2011) summarize that concepts of intercultural understanding based on these forms of active dialogue orientation are inherently humanist and, in their specific form, deeply Western and ethnocentric. Moreover, they ignore the role of power inequalities (Alexander et al., 2014, p. 32). Humanism built the basis for European Enlightenment and therefore provided a legitimation for “colonialism as a ‘civilizing’ mission” (Kumar, 2009, p. 88). This Eurocentrism is often equated with an essentialist or positivist paradigm in intercultural communication research, but in fact it also applies to more recent paradigms that primarily aim to replace this approach. For example, an interpretivist paradigm based on Geertz’s notions of culture as a process of meaning-making ultimately supports a humanist perspective that even emphasizes human exceptionalism. Humanism therefore fails to overcome the limiting influence of culture because it is also culturalist (Barker, 2004, p. 89).

### ***Responses within Humanism to These Criticisms***

Edward Said had argued for a new and more open humanism (Said, 2005). Abraham (2007), p. 11) writes that Said actually saw humanism in an ambivalent light. On the one hand, humanism as an overarching paradigm had the potential to unite adherents from all over the world. On the other hand, older conceptions of humanism laid the groundwork for cultural categorization, and indeed for the Orientalism that Said had written about. Abraham (2007, p. 6) argues that this expansion and opening of humanism on a global scale simultaneously entails the need for a new ethics, or an ethics that is not automatically inherent in humanism. In particular, human responsibility for social justice on a global scale needs to be emphasized and underlined. Interestingly, humanists here find inspiration in Levinas’ (1987) ethics of recognition of the radical other, much as posthumanists will later do. As Nainby explains, “[f]or Levinas, we are most human when we genuinely see the Face of the Other, an experience through which we have the opportunity for the human and humane recognition of the absolute difference of the Other” (Nainby, 2014, p. 318). This clearly includes refraining from attempting to “understand” this “other.”

## Posthumanist Intercultural Communication Research

The tradition of posthumanist thought in Western philosophy goes back at least as far as the tradition of humanism (Herbrechter et al., 2022, p. 21), but it may have been somewhat less focused. Although posthumanist writers often claim that their approach is not simply a response to humanism, Herbrechter et al. summarize that most recent posthumanist writings aim to deconstruct aspects for which humanism was criticized. “namely, humanism’s anthropocentrism, essentialism, exceptionalism, and speciecism” (Herbrechter et al., 2022, p. 4). Moreover, humanism and posthumanism share many parallels that continue. First of all, posthumanism is still primarily concerned with the human. Specifically, posthumanism inquires into what it means to be human, i.e. it explores ontological frameworks and keeps an eye on potential changes in these ontologies (Pennycook, 2018, p. 445). While Western philosophies and disciplines in social research have often focused on epistemological questions, i.e. how and what humans can do to perceive and explore their world, posthumanism’s reintroduction of ontological questions sheds more light on the relationship between humans and their lifeworlds, i.e. whether they face and oppose this lifeworld or are inseparable parts of it. On the ethical side, posthumanism, like humanism, stands for social transformation and change towards more global social justice. In particular, posthumanism’s broadening of perspective beyond human beings to their organic and material surroundings helps us to see beyond what human beings themselves can achieve (Bowers, 2021, p. 314). Not least, posthumanist ontologies often focus on the relations among humans as well as the organic and the material world as a synchronic and process-centred perspective.

Despite posthumanism’s rejection of traditions, Pennycook (2018, p. 446) sees a diachronic line of thought departing from Spinoza who saw culture and nature not as divided but as a monad. Although he was a humanist, Spinoza rejected a view of humans as superior to nature, and rather saw the world as a “nature-culture-continuum” (Abadía, 2018, p. 178; Braidotti, 2013, p. 2). Spinoza today is seen as one of the most prominent starting points of a long tradition that opposed and paralleled humanism in that it questioned human superiority and rationality. Alongside these declared roots of posthumanism, writers began early to doubt the human-centred perspective of humanism as an adequate way of exploring the world. Nietzsche saw human beings as trapped in a narrow world based on language (Abadía, 2018, pp. 170–171). Foucault criticized the anthropocentrism of humanism as a feature of modernity (Pennycook, 2018, p. 447) and developed a postmodern, more complex understanding of the world (Beilharz, 2007, p. 475), seeing the human subject as a product of power relations (Abadía, 2018, p. 171). Angermüller (2011, p. 121) adds that discourse theory, but also systems theory, can be seen as post-modern approaches that revolve around phenomena other than the human subject in their theoretical models. Holliday (2018, p. 1701) explains that modernism, as described by the cultural models of Durkheim’s structural functionalism, understood that people build cultures through their actions. Postmodernism understood that the notion of culture is itself a construction and a basis for identity politics and racism. In this light, structural functionalism can be seen as part of modernity. Post-structuralism, on the other hand, also belongs to modernity, but it sought central paradigmatic orientations that went beyond this structuralist organizing principle. A radical shift from entities

to processes led to the notion of the human being as always in a state of permanent becoming – an ontological move that Ferri (2020) building on Deleuze and Guattari (1987) has put into practice for intercultural communication research. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) continued the posthumanist tradition and saw the human being as infinite and driven by vitality, joy and creativity (Solé et al., 2020, p. 398). Poststructuralism also criticizes how much earlier Western philosophies saw humanity's language-bound approach to the world as a sign of human exceptionalism, when it is more a constraint of anthropocentrism that humanity should better find ways of leaving behind (Abadía, 2018, p. 176). In these veins, Barad (2007) in particular has argued that this primacy of language ignores the active and agentive forces and influences that matter and the material world have on all interaction.

Much earlier, Bruno Latour had drawn attention to the multiple interrelationships between human beings and their material world in his actor network theory (Latour, 2005). However, it was not until the work of feminist literary scholars like Karen Barad and Rosi Braidotti that intercultural communication research noticeably adopted posthumanist ideas. One reason for this may be that Latour's actor network approach was based on the assumption that this network of interrelationships does exist. Feminist approaches in contrast were more interested in humans' perceptions of these interrelationships and how an awareness of them can change their self-conception as well as their ideas about what an intercultural world might mean. For Braidotti, therefore, the material world does not exist merely as a dead structure that limits our scope for action, but is actively engaged in interaction with people, other living things, and the material world itself. This assertion can even be based on theoretical considerations: If there is no structural difference between human beings and their organic and material world, then the attribute of active engagement in overall systemic interaction can no longer be an exceptional feature of human beings, but must also apply to everything else. In these contexts, Braidotti argues for a critical posthumanist approach, as Abadía (2018, pp. 172–173) explains. The posthumanist and new materialist broadening of the scope of investigation provides a continued capacity for power-critical research aimed at global and social justice in a world of the late Anthropocene, whose conditions have changed drastically compared to the humanist era. Basically, Abadía (2018), p. 174 quotes Braidotti (2013, p. 18) as saying that “dialectical and pejorative otherness” can only emerge when the complexity of the situation and context is ignored. Posthumanism enforces this complexity by dissolving the human as a limited entity. This dissolving of boundaries and opening up to the complexity of the world also makes it possible, and even a logical consequence, to open up the discipline of the humanities and social sciences and to incorporate approaches from the natural sciences, says Abadía (2018, pp. 174–175) with reference to Braidotti (2013, pp. 148–153).

Agential realism, as introduced by Barad, overcomes earlier dilemmas between epistemology and ontology. Even more, by making the focus of research clearly on relations and interactions, agential realism helps to put these new orientations into research practice. Subjects and matter are therefore not simply existing, but rather in a state of becoming through their relations and interactions. Researchers, as observers, are part of these interactions. They contribute to the constitution of their world. Understanding these interrelations in agential realism can help make our complex world clearer to

understand (Abadía, 2018, p. 179). Chakrabarty (2009) is perhaps one of the first authors to link the practice of Western social science and the interpretation and writing of history with natural and environmental developments in the Anthropocene (Abadía, 2018, p. 179). The concept of ecology basically addresses any relationship between human beings and their material or organic environment. At its core, therefore, it brings a new ontology to social research, claiming that human beings must always be seen as part of their environment (Kong, 2016, p. 194).

### **Ontological Disruption – Epistemological Continuity**

In the light of intercultural communication research, the transition from humanist to posthumanist orientations appears as a logical continuation of the same goals, which can be summarized as ensuring the well-being and freedom of human beings to develop on an equal footing throughout the world. However, voices from the ecological turn in particular, but also from the posthumanist discourse in general, insist that the step from humanism to posthumanism cannot be thought of as a transition per se, but rather as a radical disruption. From a more nuanced perspective, the call for disruption might be sparked by the unexperienced changes at the ontological level, i.e. what humans are in relation to their environment, whereas it has to be acknowledged that humans will not be able to transcend their epistemological constraints. As a consequence, the disruption narrative of the ecological turn could be complemented by a continuity narrative that could lead to a post-intercultural communication research perspective. Both views help each other to exist in a symbiotic condition. Since the ecological turn has been outlined in the literature, a view of this symbiosis might also help to shed some light on post-intercultural communication research as a flip side of this turn.

### ***The Disruption Narrative in the Ecological Turn***

The ontological disruption brought about by posthumanist thinking is central to intercultural communication research through a focus on synchronic relations and relationalities not only between humans, but also between humans and their organic and material world. Humans are seen as an equal part of this world. Braidotti (2020, p. 394) emphasizes that this relational view contrasts sharply with a traditional arborescent perspective, in which people and their cultures are seen as having some kind of common roots. Braidotti bases this relational view on Deleuze's idea of the rhizome, where subjects are seen as interconnected through a multiple synchronous network. This fundamental rejection of thinking the world in its rootedness consequently spills over into the overall conception of posthumanist philosophy, which will forbid itself to conceive of itself in any kind of tradition. Synchronic relations, on the other hand, are favoured as a perspective, and thus it becomes much more natural to see connections to other contemporary disciplines, even to the natural sciences, and across disciplinary boundaries.

Nevertheless, some authors recognize that this posthumanist breakthrough necessarily has both a disruptive and a continuing dimension. Pennycook (2018, p. 447), for example, emphasizes that posthumanism, on the one hand, stands for the present situation of human beings in an environment and nature that has been destroyed to

such an extent that it prevents human beings from living and affects them while they are doing philosophy. Posthumanism as an academic paradigm, on the other hand, is concerned with how this posthuman situation can be addressed in both philosophy and social action. And even Braidotti agrees for better distinction: “I hold these two strands apart both in terms of intellectual genealogies and as social movements” (Braidotti, 2020, p. 393).

Still, these ontological adjustments have far-reaching consequences, and without them the goals of the posthumanist project could not be achieved, which can be seen primarily in the opening up of human perspectives beyond the one-dimensional constraints of prevailing traditional notions of cultures and boundaries. As Braidotti points out, it is a real challenge “to re-define the subject of knowledge and power without reference to that unitary, humanistic, Eurocentric and masculinist subject” (Braidotti, 2020, p. 394). And it is only when the anthropocentric constraints of humanism have been completely overcome that a perspective of transversality becomes possible, which means seeing the human being on a range of axes: “across social classes, trans-cultural, trans-sex and transgender, but also trans-individual, trans-species and trans-human” (Braidotti, 2020, p. 393).

### ***The Continuity Narrative: Posthumanism Comes from Theory***

But even more so, authors from the traditional disciplines claim that there is not all that much that is really new about posthumanism, but that traditional research has in any case long since understood what the crucial questions of our time are and has begun to address them on a broad basis. From anthropology, for example, Ingold (2024) argues that posthumanism’s idea of starting by overturning all existing research findings through disruption is unnecessary. According to him, humanism has simply taken a wrong turn by isolating man from nature and by its radical belief in permanent progress, which makes leaving nature behind a necessity. Such a belief must automatically lead to anthropocentrism and ethnocentrism, two of the main criticisms of humanism today. However, Ingold argues that these flaws were never the core ideas of humanism, only its consequences. In contrast, human universalism was one of humanism’s central concerns.

Carneiro (2022, p. 150) goes even deeper in his critique in that humans will never be able to overcome their epistemological condition. He argues that all of poststructuralism’s attempts to find something new are actually nothing more than an illusion. He refers to Deleuze’s “planes of immanence,” which cannot be anything other than a kind of arrangement that ignores some other arrangements, and more so, it even negates the possibility of an external point of view. Moreover, Carneiro (2022, pp. 150–151) builds on Deleuze’s notion of levels of immanence to illustrate that any phenomenon in the historical development of academic and social discourse could have been constructed and treated in a multitude of completely different ways than it actually was. This insight can also be applied to the emergence of the ecological turn in intercultural communication research based on posthumanist philosophies. This ecological turn could also have come about in very different ways, and therefore Carneiro stresses “how important it is to trace the genealogies of thinking behind current proposals for changing the systems of knowledge production” (Carneiro, 2022, p. 151).

## Post-Intercultural Communication

This article has traced the development of intercultural communication research, first within a humanist and then within a posthumanist framework, as the discipline moves towards its ecological turn. It is from this point that this article will begin to explore future implications of this development and interplay of ecological and intercultural concerns. It will consider possible outcomes of the convergence of these two fields on an ecological perspective, but also on transformations of intercultural communication research that have hardly been reflected upon so far from a meta-perspective. And while this article is clearly focused on epistemological and the newly rediscovered ontological frameworks of research, these final sections will also shed some further light on how these approaches can be translated into adequate methodologies for empirical research.

With regard to methodologies, there may be at least two divergent points of view on their handling, and this author appreciates both in their strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it may be clear from the reflections in this article that the turns and reorientations discussed here need to be based first and foremost on the understandings, attitudes and research orientations of the researchers themselves. That being said, any empirical research, even existing research, is valuable and its data is worthy of being explored, as long as researchers look at these data in the light of and with questions in line with the emphases discussed here.

Alternatively, researchers can take care to ensure that their research methods support and put into practice the epistemological and ontological assumptions of their underlying theories, highlighting and incorporating them. A strong version of this argument was made, for example, by Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre when she introduced her approach to post-qualitative research, claiming that a study's ontological assumptions must be consistent with its underlying theory as well as its methods, otherwise a study will not be able to reach its full potential. Roughly speaking, for example, writers should not claim to have overcome anthropocentrism and then put people on a pedestal by letting them speak when answering interview questions (St Pierre, 2023, p. 22). While St. Pierre had argued that writers should do nothing more than read poststructuralist theory and then let the world affect them, Lather (2022, p. 31) argues that "the field is our best friend in developing practices toward a different kind of science" and that qualitative approaches can also open us up to poststructuralist views of our world. Busch and Franco (2023) have recently reviewed the potential and challenges of work in intercultural communication research that follows poststructuralist ontologies on the basis of autoethnography, participatory action research and arts-based research, as work in these strands has so far aimed to address issues of intercultural communication research in an era of ecological turn. Also, debates about the role of intercultural communication research given the ecological turn and posthumanist approach differ in the extent to which they feel the discipline needs to be transformed. While Mendoza and Kinefuchi conclude that the ecological turn must be accompanied by a new discipline of "critical intercultural communication" (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2023, p. 588) that transcends Western ethnocentrism with its "expertise and commitment to not take hegemonic

knowledge and practices for granted and to bring silenced voices to the center” (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2023, p. 588), the reflections on the role of culture under humanist and posthumanist conditions legitimize a questioning of the role of culture as a research term altogether.

A first and fundamental observation concerns the fact that culture is obviously not central to either approach, whereas intercultural communication research might otherwise lead us to expect it to be. Humanist and posthumanist perspectives can be seen as a modification of the culturalist perspective from this basic starting point. On the contrary, the being, the becoming and the feeling of the human being seem to play a central role in both humanist and post-humanist approaches. This human-centred perspective, in contrast to what may have been the classical culturalist perspective, can therefore be expected to emphasize human autonomy in the context of its embeddedness in a highly complex and multiple relational network. Conversely, it is not culture that binds human beings to anything. On the contrary, human beings have a high responsibility for the relations between human beings, between species and between matter, not only on an individual basis, but also and especially on a socio-political level.

### ***Culturalism Obscures Humaneness***

Ultimately, it can be said that the very idea of the phenomenon of culture is a humanist product. It would not have arisen without humanist anthropocentrism and the inter-species hierarchy that it implies. It is only from this point of view that it becomes relevant and interesting to find a category for that which uses “culture” to define and collect human products and to examine it more closely. Only the fact that they are human products makes this category more interesting from a humanist perspective. Existing inequalities in both directions, inequalities within the human species and inequalities between humans and nature, are obscured and ignored by this focus on culture as a collective human product. In this context, a category of culture in a paradigm that deliberately opposes an anthropocentric perspective that places humans above all else is not only no longer meaningful and relevant, but categorization at this level is simply unthinkable or nonexistent. In light of these considerations, it can be assumed that a posthumanist paradigm would have to radically deconstruct concepts of culture and interculturality of all paradigms, and this would affect both essentialist and constructivist understandings of culture. In short, “culture” might be better off not being mentioned at all in posthumanist inquiries. However, even within posthumanist studies, we might consider how to reflect on our past history and present practice of categorizing our world according to cultures, since that was our point of departure for the whole endeavour. “Intercultural” communication from a humanist point of view would therefore actually transcend the old philosophical metaphor of a person from one culture meeting another person from another culture, but that there is a more or less “culture-free” gap between cultures in which individuals can meet. “Inter-cultural” from a humanist perspective would therefore literally mean “between cultures.” Post-humanist thinking, on the other hand, is designed from the outset in such a way that this hurdle does not arise in the first place. Since this image does not make sense but as a contrast to the old “inter-cultural” image, it therefore makes sense to continue to speak of “post-intercultural” communication.

### ***Freedom and Responsibility***

By dissolving categorizations and binaries, posthumanism initially suspends human beings in a new space where, due to multiple complexities, much is potentially possible, nothing is unthinkable, where human beings are not fixed and are fundamentally always in the process of becoming. As mentioned at the beginning, posthumanism itself does not bring a new ethics. It simply opens up more possibilities and spaces for thinking. It does, however, take up the ethical orientations of humanism, according to which every human potential is always accompanied by a complex and multiple responsibility for the world. In a posthumanist perspective, human beings may be able to pursue this responsibility more thoroughly. They are not fundamentally prevented from doing so by hidden blocks. They have “temporary and radically unstable identities that are open to modification and alteration” (Solé et al., 2020, p. 397).

This opening also brings into view new and additional phenomena that have also been obscured by the focus on culture in traditional research on intercultural communication. Badwan and Hall (2020, p. 228), for example, point to what Holliday and MacDonald (2020) call “intersubjectivity.” When people interact with each other, not least as subjects of intercultural research, they also develop emotional relationships with each other that neither they nor researchers can fully articulate. Similarly, researchers always develop relationships with their subjects that are influenced by their own subjectivity in their very unique biographical experiences. Many new synchronic and diachronic relationships between people and between people and things and the organic world become visible. In their study, Badwan and Hall explore these multiple interrelationships by walking through a migrant neighbourhood where one of the authors has spent a lot of time in the past. They produce an ethnographic account that is sensitive to emotional and relational perceptions of social spaces.

Solé et al. (2020, p. 398) take a different stance. Rather than abandoning the notion of culture altogether, they see intercultural communication research as a discipline that, because of its sometimes problematic core theme of culture, has addressed the epistemological and ontological drawbacks associated with this paradigm. In fact, even humanist orientations in intercultural communication research can be understood as an attempt at this mission. Posthumanist views even go one step further, and for Ros i Solé et al. this means redefining the intercultural as such. In fact, they see a “life-enhancing view of the intercultural” that drives the discipline itself to develop “new vocabularies and new intellectual influences that cut across disciplines but that have similar ontologies” (Solé et al., 2020, p. 398).

### ***The Intercultural Defines Humaneness***

For this reason, it can also be said that the intercultural in posthumanist intercultural communication research is more and more taking on the role of exploring and defining what constitutes being human, especially with the help of a posthumanist perspective. Accordingly, it may also be in this vein, for example, that authors such as Braidotti (2020, p. 395) emphasize affect when it comes to describing the relational subjectivities of

posthumanism: “We are relational beings, defined by the capacity to affect and be affected” (Braidotti, 2020, p. 395). Again, Badwan and Hall’s (2020) is a literally prototypical approach to intercultural communication research when they walk through streets, pass restaurants and shops, resting and swinging in playgrounds. Solé et al. (2020, p. 400) add that the experience of joy is another quality that may not be exclusive to human beings; however, interculturality can be defined as this process of experiencing joy in the discovery of the newness of intercultural encounters, which can be defined as “[a] process that brings joy and creates new forms of life and new forms of being” (Solé et al., 2020, p. 400).

### ***What is Post-Intercultural Communication Research?***

This state of new debates in intercultural communication research, resonating with the ecological turn and responding to it with new, posthumanist underpinnings of its ontologies, can be described as a complex situation of post-intercultural communication worthy of further exploration. While the theoretical debate encourages humanity to overcome culturalism altogether, this culturalism has also been the starting point of our reflections. This culturalism will need permanent and thorough observation in the future, as a critical perspective on all power inequalities will need to be continued and encouraged by the transversal perspective.

In sum, this new post-intercultural communication research provides a starting point for exploring even broader concepts, such as what it means to be human and what responsibilities humans have for each other and for their world. Whereas in earlier humanist research culture was perceived as limiting the scope of human action, culture now embraces the human being with its myriad possibilities, relations, and responsibilities. For this post-intercultural communication research, this admittedly disruptive turn must also have consequences for the internal terminology of such a new field. Kebabi (2024, pp. 8–10), for example, has recently elaborated what a posthumanist epistemology and ontology means for the concept of identity in intercultural communication research, which now needs to be conceived beyond ethnocentric and anthropocentric narrowness and “not exclusively relational in terms of ‘self’ and human ‘other’” (Kebabi, 2024, p. 9). This also applies to concepts of difference, which can no longer be seen as binarist and divisive, but as something new and open. Even the traditional notion of intercultural competence, as Ferri (2020, p. 412) summarizes, will have to move away from its “self/other dichotomy and with narratives of intercultural competence as a transparent process of acquisition of intercultural skills” towards the openness of people to embark on “rhizomatic intercultural journeys as enmeshed in the complex nexus between subjectivity and its embodied character in the world” (Ferri, 2020, p. 412). Ferri approaches the phenomenon in a post-qualitative mode, reading Deleuze and Guattari’s post-structuralist works and then going into Audre Lorde’s literary autobiography, which then opens up views on what Braidotti had called transversal relations.

Finally, the notion of culture itself can no longer stand at the centre of the discipline’s argument as an essentialised and static entity, even if this could be deconstructed in a constructivist way. Instead, the discipline will have no choice but to focus on the processes of change in individuals, beings, matter and their relations that occur and define intercultural encounters. Basically, as Ferri (2020, p. 415) summarizes,

interculturalism can continue to represent the ethical orientation in intercultural interaction, which may include an emphasis on dialogue, reciprocity, recognition and responsibility, as long as this orientation is based on posthumanist epistemological and ontological assumptions.

Accordingly, future research can still be produced by and for humans and from their perspective, but it will need to see their interrelationships with each other and with their world in a light that consciously overcomes the power imbalances that were still partly untouched in previous, even humanist, approaches. In the sense of Carneiro (2022, p. 150), human beings will hardly be able to overcome their epistemological position, but it will be their responsibility to constantly reflect on their transversal (Braidotti, 2020, p. 393) interrelations in order to overcome the power imbalances embedded in these dimensions. The notion of the “post-intercultural” keeps us aware of this ongoing process of emancipation, which needs to be consciously kept alive. Given these epistemological constraints, and taking into account the methodological considerations above, most of the existing empirical methods can, in principle, provide valuable insights in this light, as long as their results are considered under the perspectives and questions that arise from a post-intercultural perspective. Moreover, with a particular sensitivity to ontological transformations and groundings, the above-mentioned methods may be preferred for exploring the relations of a post-intercultural world. Post-interculturality in posthumanism stands for our world as a continuous process. This means that post-interculturality will always be a “personal transformation journey” (Yu, 2022, p. 189) of the self in a posthuman and complex context.

## Conclusion

The ecological turn in intercultural communication research gives interculturality a new role in the discipline, expressed in a post-intercultural communication perspective and research. This new view of the field becomes apparent when the ecological turn is paralleled with the posthumanist philosophies that support it. While both strands often claim that a clear disruption from previous approaches is a prerequisite for putting these new paradigms into practice, posthumanism can also be seen as a continuation of humanism, often obscured by posthumanism’s own ahistorical preferences for relationships rather than rootedness and tradition. However, intercultural communication research has always been characterized by its humanist orientation, which in fact places human freedom and development above an exclusive cultural research. Culture can be understood here as a humanist product, while humanist intercultural communication research has at the same time aimed at overcoming the constraints resulting from this product. Posthumanism puts these notions of culture even further aside in favour of a preference for considering the myriad relations of human beings in their social, organic and material worlds equally. Post-intercultural communication research therefore seeks to explore the potentials and responsibilities of human beings in their ecologies.

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