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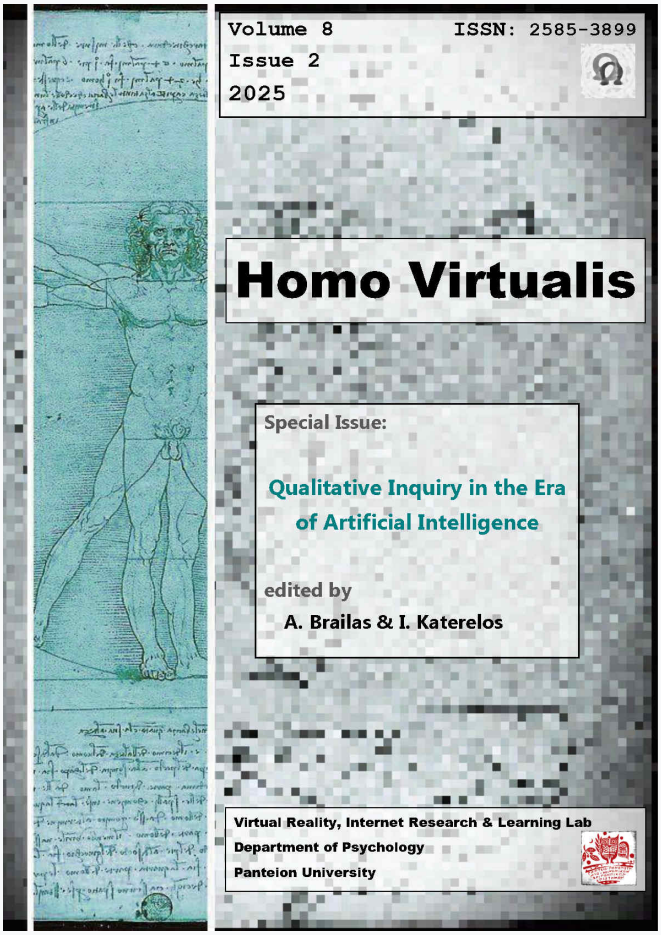

Qualitative Inquiry in the era of artificial intelligence: Why and how to keep the practice human?

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Editorial

Qualitative Inquiry in the era of artificial intelligence: Why and how to keep the practice human?

Alexios Brailas [1] & Ioannis Katerelos [2]

Abstract: How might our research practice, and our very way of knowing, change if, instead of rushing to feed qualitative data into 'intelligent' machines for the supposed ever optimal analysis, we returned our attention to the living moment of data production itself, treating it as an embodied, mindful, relational, and transformative act of co-creation, presence, and meaning-making that no algorithm can replicate? In this era of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), qualitative research is at a crossroads. Large Language Models (LLMs) promise a more objective and efficient way to analyze vast volumes of qualitative data. This may seem like a magical solution for the positivist approach to qualitative inquiry, the so-called *small q* tradition. Yet, it also presents a dystopian prospect for the more interpretive, relational, culturally situated, and social-constructionist approaches of the *big Q* tradition. In the latter case, the risk is that the qualitative researcher becomes overshadowed by the machine, with the process losing its relational and generative capacities. This special issue addresses precisely this tension by showcasing a series of undergraduate research projects, demonstrating why it is so important to keep qualitative inquiry, and especially qualitative interviewing, a profoundly human practice. Generative AI is here to stay. The challenge now becomes how to make qualitative inquire even more process-oriented, relational, meaningful, embodied, and transformative, and how to use AI technologies in ways that serve this purpose.

Keywords: qualitative research, artificial intelligence, interviews, transformative research, epistemology

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Qualitative Inquiry in the era of artificial intelligence

How might our research practice, and our very way of knowing, change if, instead of rushing to feed qualitative data into "intelligent" machines for the supposed ever optimal analysis, we returned our attention to the living moment of data production itself, treating it as an embodied, mindful, relational, and transformative act of co-creation, presence, and meaning-making that no algorithm can replicate?

In the era of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), this special issue of the *Homo Virtualis* Journal attempts exactly this: to move the conversation from how AI can enhance efficiency to what is unique about qualitative research and distinguishes it from other epistemological and methodological traditions. Through a series of peer-reviewed articles based on the dissertation projects of undergraduate psychology students at Panteion University, we emphasize the role that qualitative inquiry plays as a deeply relational, multimodal, process-oriented, and transformative research practice that goes beyond understanding to world-making.

Figure 1: Modern Luddites destroying computers and robots. A fictional image.

Source: AI generated picture by gemini-2.5-flash (an AI platform developed by Google) following the prompt: *make a retro vintage drawing of people with sticks destroying computers and robots.*

The Luddites were a well-known movement of the 19th century. Members of the group were English textile workers who protested against automated machinery that threatened their wages and jobs. Identifying themselves as followers of the mythical figure *Ned Ludd*, they organized raids to destroy the machines and sent threatening letters to mill owners and officials (Wikipedia, 2025). The case of the Luddites offers us a strong lesson for today. Technological progress cannot be reversed, and generative AI is here to stay (Figure 1). That does not mean we are passive observers watching the unfolding of history; we are part of the history, and the future is not given, it is co-shaped by our actions and decisions today. We may not reverse technological development, and we may not wish to, but we can decide on its course.

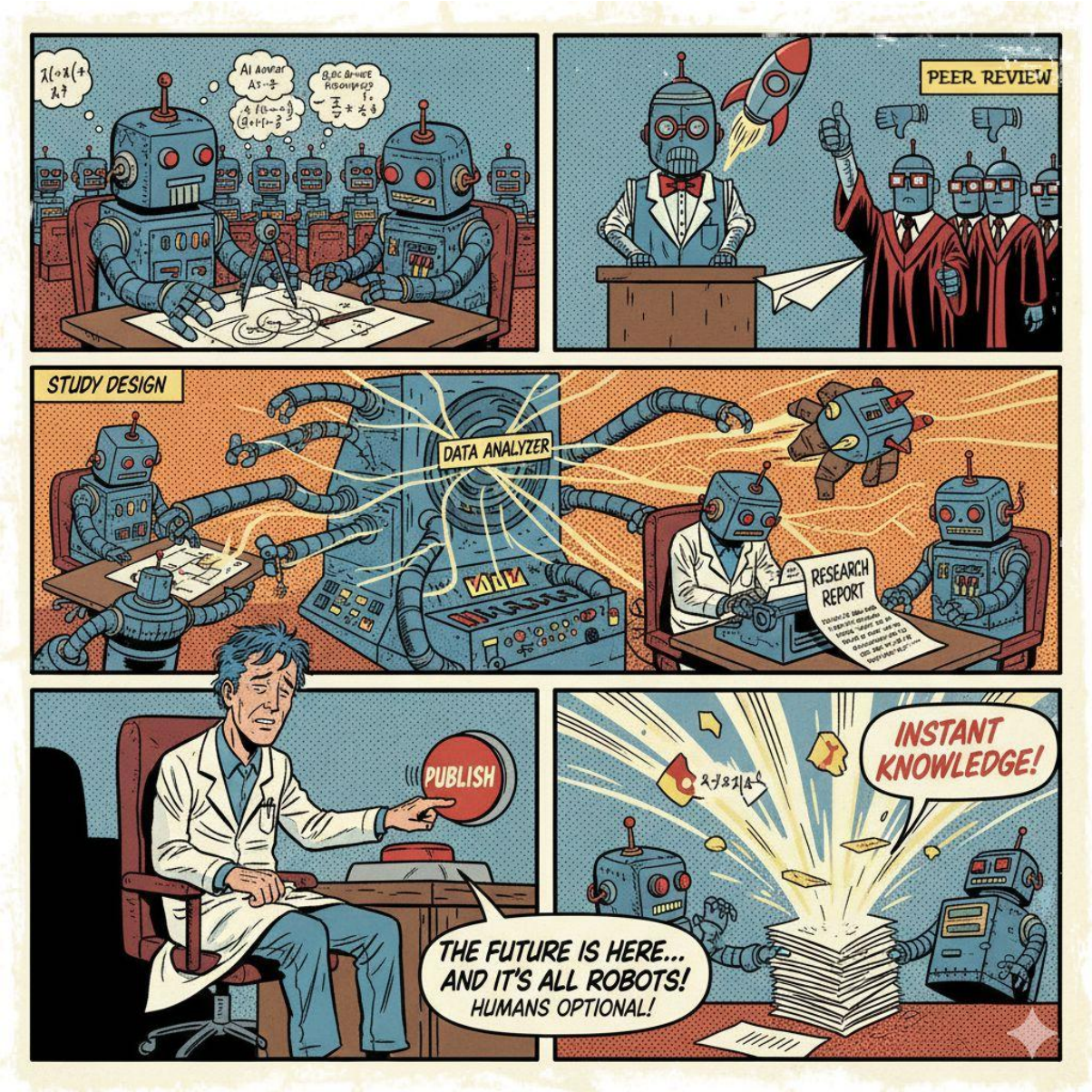
AI is a technological tool, like many others before it, yet at the same time quite unique and different from previous technologies (Brailas, 2024). Humans have always existed in a symbiotic relationship with technology (Koskinas, 2018). For example, we have used generative AI here in this article to grammatically proofread the writing and to produce some of the images, as indicated. AI is also going to dramatically affect the way qualitative research is conducted, especially in the data analysis phase. In the *small q* more positivist approach to qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Kidder & Fine, 1987), it would be a game changer, enabling far more efficient and seemingly objective analysis of vast amounts of qualitative data. But even within the *big Q*, more interpretative and culturally-informed tradition, the temptation will be strong. The prevailing *publish or perish* dogma, along with neoliberal imperatives for increased productivity, quantifiable accountability, and the commercialization of (higher) education, is likely to urge many qualitative researchers to outsource part of their interpretive work to machines (Brailas, 2025a; Watermeyer et al., 2024). And in some cases, a hybrid approach may be advantageous, with AI-assisted analysis, under certain conditions, helping and complementing the human analyst (Brailas, 2025a). The point we want to make here is that it will likely be inevitable: in the end, qualitative *data analysis* of empirical data will be difficult to sustain as an entirely human endeavor. And in some cases, even within the *big Q* tradition, this may be something fundamentally positive, with the algorithms offering a complementary view to the human researcher (Brailas, 2025a).

Prolegomena to an AI science

AI can now be used even for *data production*, with many research software platforms advertising AI avatar interviewers, a technological capability easily imaginable with modern LLMs and AI video tools and deepfake technologies. Moreover, AI can design a research project. In fact, AI can design a study, perform a literature review, produce/collect the data, analyze them, discuss the findings, and write the whole research report/article. It can then submit the paper for publication, with AI reviewers evaluating the manuscript and AI editors overseeing the entire process. The only humans remaining in this chain would be the participants, who could also be

replaced by AIs generating the so-called *artificial or synthetic data*. In the end, from conception to publication, producing a research article could take only seconds, with the press of a single button being the only task left for the human researcher, if humans are needed at all (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The AI science Paradigm: research by AIs and for AIs. A technophobic imagination of our future? An inevitable forthcoming dystopia? Or a eutopia, a better way to do better science?



Source: AI generated picture by gemini-2.5-flash (an AI platform developed by Google) following the prompt: *produce a retro comic image inspired by the following text (you can use robots to visualize the AIs): [the text of the paragraph that refers to this image was used].*

Do you think this is only sci-fi imagination? While we were writing the last lines of this editorial, we realized that this scenario of AI science, as it is vividly illustrated (with the help of AI, paradoxically) in Figure 2, is already unfolding today, with

qualitative research at the epicenter of the debate. On 29 October 2025, 416 experienced qualitative researchers from 38 countries signed and published an open letter rejecting the use of generative artificial intelligence in reflexive qualitative research (Jowsey et al., 2025). Susanne Friese, another well-known qualitative researcher with expertise in software for qualitative data analysis and now affiliated with Qeludra, a company specializing in AI-augmented qualitative research, responded immediately. On 1 November 2025, she published a rebuttal attempting to debunk the arguments presented in the letter (Friese, 2025). It appears that a scholarly "war" (if we are to use a more dramatic expression) is already unfolding between those advocating for qualitative research without AI and those proposing AI-augmented qualitative inquiry.

Meanwhile, Friese and a team of other scholars have launched an experimental qualitative research conference, under the scope "AI Conducts Research and Writes, Humans Reflect":

> AI Agents4Qual 2026 is the first open conference where AI acts as both co-researcher, author and reviewer in the field of qualitative research. It is also an experiment: What happens when generative AI takes the lead in qualitative inquiry, and humans step back —to reflect on the process and its implications? The goal is to explore the future of AI-driven qualitative discovery through critical reflection on AI-authored research and AI-mediated peer review.[3]

And humans step back…[4] AI taking the lead in some or all phases of qualitative research, from study design, data production/collection, and analysis to authoring reports, reviewing manuscripts, and making publication decisions, represents the AI science paradigm described above (Figure 2). Is this an inevitable dystopia? Or a eutopia, a better way to do better science?

In this editorial, following a social constructionist epistemology, we argue that reality –or at least our perception of reality, which nevertheless has real effects on us– is not something that lies out there waiting to be discovered. The reality of qualitative inquiry, and how it is best conducted, is shaped by our actions, our decisions, and the ways in which we envision our research practice in the future. Grounded on these epistemological –as well political– premises, we call for keeping the practice of qualitative inquiry human, and we argue for this in this editorial through the contributions made in this special issue.

[3] Source: https://www.aiagents4qual.org/call-for-papers/, retrieved 14 November 2025.

[4] These words, chosen by the organizers of this conference, echo for us the lyrics from Simon & Garfunkel's *The Sound of Silence*: "And the people bowed and prayed to the neon god they made," as well as the working hypothesis we formulated seven years ago regarding *Therapist Panoptes*, an omnipresent AI psychotherapeutic agent (Brailas, 2019). The idea is visually illustrated in the this video: https://vimeo.com/328980060

Why it is critical to keep the practice of Qualitative Inquiry human

There are many arguments for why we should avoid outsourcing our own cognitive tasks to algorithms. One basic argument is that by doing so, we may become less cognitively capable ourselves, and in the long run, this could lead to a technological dystopia, one in which we become servants to superior machines and, ultimately, unnecessary for existence (Kasirzadeh, 2025). This is the use it or lose it argument. Essentially, it is like going to the gym with a robot and asking the robot to lift the weights for us (Figure 3). We need to lift the weights ourselves to remain strong and capable.

Figure 3: The 'use it or lose it' argument. If we constantly outsource our cognitive tasks to the machines, in the end our cognitive abilities will decline.

Source: AI generated picture by gemini-2.5-flash (an AI platform developed by Google) following a prompt to produce a retro comic image to visualise the 'use it or lose it' argument with robot assistants in a gym.

For example, in a recent experimental study, Kosmyna et al. (2025) investigated the cognitive effects of using generative AI in essay writing. Participants were assigned to one of three conditions: LLM-assisted, search engine-assisted, or "brain-only," relying solely on their own cognitive resources. The results revealed an interesting paradox. Essays produced with generative AI assistance were often rated more favorably in terms of coherence and polish, yet participants in this condition exhibited reduced neural connectivity and weaker memory recall. In contrast, those who wrote without

technological mediation demonstrated the highest levels of cognitive engagement and sense of ownership.

The counterargument, however, is that this has always been the case with technology. Technology constantly rewires and fundamentally alters our brains. For example, the oral human brain is entirely different from the literate brain, the brain of those humans who were able to read and write. Some skills were lost during that transition, while many others were gained (Ong, 2002). The same may happen with AI technology: human researchers may lose some basic skills and abilities but, in the end, develop and acquire many others that not only counterbalance the loss but may even outweigh it. In that case, the scenario in Figure 2 represents merely a technophobic interpretation of how things might evolve. The way humans conduct science may indeed change fundamentally, but not by being overshadowed. Instead, we may take on other, more critical roles that, at present, we cannot even imagine.

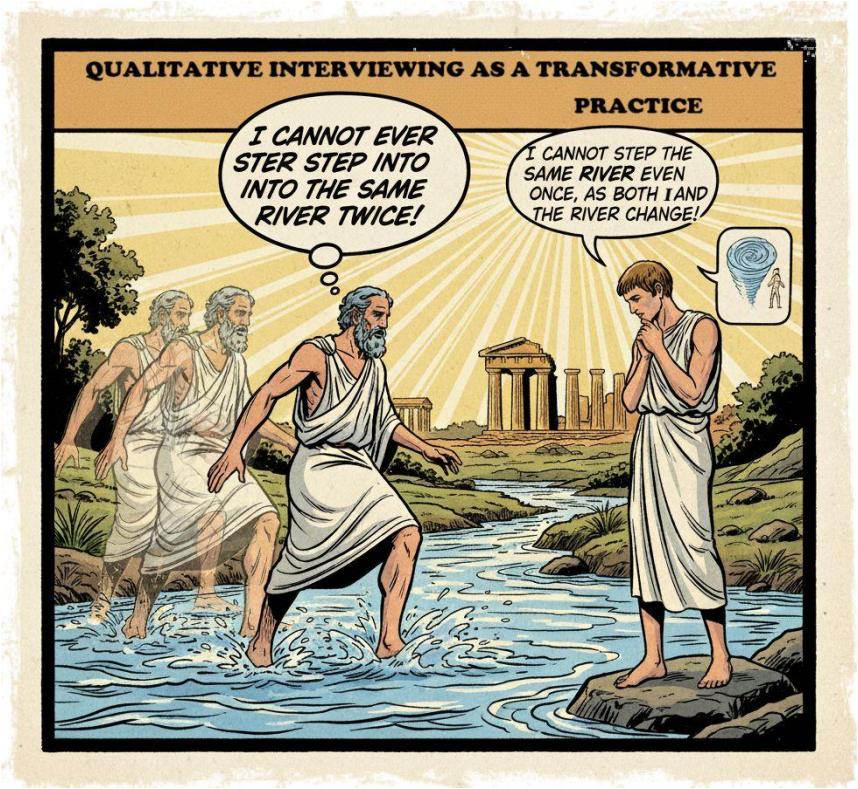
Figure 4: A fictional visualization of the extractive, discovering the *what is out there*, approach in qualitative interviewing. Within a positivist framework of qualitative research, the human interviewer, or even the participant, can easily be replaced by AI.

Source: AI generated picture by gemini-2.5-flash (an AI platform developed by Google) following the prompt: *produce a retro comic image to visualize the scene with a robot interviewer, interviewing a human, by putting a funnel instrument to the participant's head to discover what they are thinking of.*

Research as a process of extraction

However, the risk/fear of cognitive decline is not the main argument we aim to make here against outsourcing qualitative inquiry to the machines. For the sake of convenience and clarity, we will focus on the practice of qualitative interviewing. There are essentially two fundamentally different ways of conducting qualitative interviews. The first, more positivist approach, is the *what is* approach, which views research as an extractive and supposedly 'objective' process. In this paradigm, there is something in the participant's mind waiting for the researcher to discover it as objectively as possible. One could visualize this as an interviewer placing a virtual funnel to the participant's head in order to extract what is inside (Figure 4). In this scenario, it is easy to imagine the human researcher/interviewer being replaced by an AI avatar that asks the same questions in exactly the same way to all participants in a study. If one conceptualizes qualitative interviewing, and qualitative data collection more broadly, in this way, then there is no reason not to replace the human researcher, or even the participants, with AI entities. On the contrary, this would make the entire process even more efficient and reliable.

Figure 5: Heraclitus and his student Cratylus reflecting on the eternal flow of things and the transformative power of presence and being. Within this context of transactional causality (*I change you the very moment you change me*) qualitative interviewing can be understood as a deeply relational and transformative praxis, with both individuals leaving the room different from those who entered just an hour before.



Source: AI generated picture by gemini-2.5-flash (an AI platform developed by Google).

Research as transformative practice

However, there is a fundamentally different way of understanding qualitative interviewing, and qualitative research overall, within social constructionist epistemologies. In this view, qualitative interviewing is a transformative, future-oriented practice: a practice of *world-making* that focuses less on *what is out there* and more on *what could become* (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2013; Gergen, 1978, 2015). Social constructionism argues that reality, or our perception of it, is constructed through social interactions and the constitutive mediation of language. Language is not a neutral tool for describing reality; language *produces* the reality (Gergen, 2009, 2020). Words matter. Who asks the questions, what questions are asked, and in what context –all these matter.

From this perspective, qualitative interviewing is a transformative practice in which both people leave the room different from who they were an hour before. Heraclitus, the famous ancient Greek philosopher, claimed that no one can step into the same river twice, for with each attempt, both the river and the person have changed (Figure 5). His student, Cratylus, extended this idea even further, suggesting that one cannot step into the same river even once, since the very act of stepping in transforms both the river and the person (Allan, 1954). This is the realization of qualitative interviewing as a deeply relational transformative practice (Brailas, 2025b). The observer recognizes that they are part of the observed and does not pretend to remain uninvolved or merely listen (Von Foerster, 1984, 2003). Instead, withing a framework of transactional causality, they acknowledge their complicity, bring it to the foreground, and use it for the benefit of both the research process and the participants.

So, in this view, qualitative interviewing is not a neutral process of extracting data, but an intra-action (Barad, 2006) that changes both parties. So, is it possible to imagine an anthropoid AI entity, with the appearance of a human, taking on the interviewer's role and engaging in such action research–like interventions with other humans? Probably, especially within a culture focused primarily on increased productivity and financial optimization. In principle, every interaction is transformative, either with a river or with an AI. But it is impossible to know today how such interactions would unfold or what specific and distinct affordances they might present (Brailas, 2024). What we do know from communication studies is that human-to-human communication is also nonverbal, and that the nonverbal component is the most important in shaping the relational and transformative background of that interaction (Watzlawick et al., 1967). We also know from the emerging field of interpersonal neurobiology that the right-brain to right-brain biological communication between humans is critical for emotional attunement and for establishing rapport, resonance, and deep connection (Cozolino & Davis, 2017; Schore, 2022; Siegel, 2012). This is critical for participants to feel safe and appreciated enough to open their hearts, and share their feelings and intimate thoughts. To

become intraconnected enough (Siegel, 2022) to realize things in the presence of the other that they could not have imagined just before entering the room, and to feel valued, seen, and honored.

Figure 6: How and why to keep some practices human? Drawings, sandtray discs, body mappings, narratives, and other material artifacts produced by the authors and participants in the research studies featured in this special issue were employed during qualitative interviews, in the living here and now of their intrapersonal communication, as a means of connecting through the process of making and communicating via analog, right-brain, nonverbal modalities.

Source: Artifacts created by the authors and the participants of the special issue

Could such an experience be imitated by the *as-if* performances of an anthropoid robot? Or are biological mirroring and other neurons required in both the researcher and the participant for this kind of connection? We do not yet know. But qualitative interviewing, as a transformative practice, is not transformative only for the participants, it is also transformative for the researchers themselves.

For all these reasons, it is critical to keep the practice of qualitative inquiry a human, embodied endeavor, one that occurs between humans, at least within the *big Q* qualitative tradition and the epistemological paradigms of action research and social constructionism.

How to keep the practice of Qualitative Research human? This special issue

We live in an ecology of mind, an ecosystem of communication (Bateson, 1972; Harries-Jones, 2016). Language is but one channel. A drawing, a photograph, a body mapping, a sandtray disk, a letter from the future self, a clay construction, the figure of your personal hero (Figure 6), these are not mere illustrations. They are different logical types of communication. They speak in metaphor, in symbol, in archetypes, in pattern. This multimodal approach acknowledges that the mind thinks in many different modalities simultaneously (Brailas, 2020). Most studies in psychology look for what is problematic, what is dysfunctional, what is broken. An anatomy of deficiency. The research projects in this special issue, they set a different question. They may still ask "What is your problem?" but later during the same qualitative interviews they also ask “What gives life to you?" and “What are your dreams?” (Brailas, 2025b; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2013; McAdam & Mirza, 2009). The articles in this special issue co-create a wonderfully colorful mosaic of qualitative research, of deep personal communication, and of transformative relational praxis amid a greater counter-culture of individualism. By doing so, they attempt to form “islands” of negentropy and flourishing within an “entropic sea.” We believe this is the best way to help prepare tomorrow’s psychologists to navigate the murky waters of the 21st century.

How to re-weave a world that is coming undone? Adaliali (2025) explores the challenges and resources of women caregivers of people suffering from dementia. The study reveals the contradictory voices of the participants. They speak of being trapped, yet of finding love; of exhaustion, yet of a strange strength. They are caught in a loop where they must care, yet the act of caring consumes them. This is the story of a double bind that appears in many of the studies in this special issue. The bind lies in the meaning they are forced to make. Society, and often their own sense of duty, tells them, “This is love, this is family.” Yet their daily experience is one of immense practical difficulty and emotional turmoil. They cannot leave the field; they are morally and emotionally committed, so they must find a way to live within the paradox. And there is a deeper, more sorrowful pattern. They speak of a “continuous loss.” They are mourning the person while that person is still alive. The body is present, but the person they knew is psychologically absent. This freezes the process

of grief. There is no closure, only a long, drawn-out farewell. This study plays a critical role. The women are not merely reporting facts; their narratives become the tool through which they bridge the gap between an impossible situation and the necessity of enduring it. The pattern connecting these women is the heroic, tragic, and deeply human struggle to reweave a world that is coming undone.

How is it to be in the between zone? Argiropoulou (2025) explores the existential questions and dreams of Gen Z at the onset of adulthood. The world the participants must navigate is one of double binds and fragmented logic: "Be independent, but you need us." "Find your unique self, but be successful by these standardized measures." and "Plan your future in a world that feels increasingly unplannable." In this context, it is not surprising that the "protagonist" of their experience is anxiety. Through an appreciative, multimodal inquiry, participants were invited to draw their ideal futures. They drew houses, cities, schools, peaceful scenes with people they love. As Gregory Bateson highlighted, the unit of survival is not the solitary individual, but always the individual-in-their-environment (Harries-Jones, 2016). When a young person (the participant) speaks and is truly heard by another (the researcher), or when they draw a picture of their future and share it, they are not merely receiving support. They are participating in a transactional process of mutual empowerment. These relationships are the channels through which meaning is co-created and through which their inner turbulence can begin to find resolution.

Where do dreams live? Kouroukouni (2025), in her existential and appreciative study of life dreams in university students, wonderfully uses metaphorical questions, among other multimodal techniques, to capture the *emotional weather* of the participants: "*Take a moment and imagine your current mood as weather. What is the forecast today?*" By asking about the emotional weather, the researcher invites the participant to become a meta-observer of their own emotional state within the process. They are mapping the effect of the conversation on the conversation. It creates a feedback loop about the relationship itself. "*Sunny with a few clouds*" is not just a feeling; it is a commentary on the entire event. It is a description of a changed system. The researcher did not discover empowerment; she orchestrated and participated in a context where empowerment was more likely to occur.

What is the pattern of resilience? Lampris (2025), in his study examines the challenges young "non-professional" athletes face and the ways they devise to overcome them. Participants in the study speak of exhaustion and pressure, and a competitive atmosphere, a system generating more and more of the same "win, win, win" mentality until you break down, you get injured. But the inquiry also asked, "What gives you life?" And through the answers, a pattern of resilience was formed. A person who feels satisfied in isolation is like a tree that has grown tall. It is an achievement. But a person who is woven into a network of mutual respect and support is part of a forest. The forest creates its own climate; it resists storms differently. And this is the pattern of resilience according to this study.

Why romantic love is so messy? Louki (2025) explores romantic relationships in emerging adulthood through an intercultural lens. In Southern Europe, in Greece, Italy, and Spain, people between 18 and 24 are living their love stories differently than their parents did. They are full of contradictions. They want love, but they also want freedom. They use phones to find each other, but the phones also push them apart. And their families are both a safe harbor and a cage. Participants in the study grew up with Disney tales, stories of perfect, eternal love that ends in marriage. But now they find that real love is complicated, full of compromises. It's as if they were given one map as children, but the territory they must walk as adults is entirely different. Society, through family and old stories, tells them: "You should find lasting love." But the same society, through economic pressures and new digital possibilities, tells them: "Don't settle down yet; keep your options open." When an organism receives two contradictory commands, a double bind, what does it do? It evolves a new behavior. In this case, new forms of relationships: "situationships," "friends with benefits," "stayover relationships." The value of this study is not in judging whether this is good or bad. Its value is in exploring the pattern. By mapping the territory through her study, the researcher also redraws the broken map for everyone.

Why do people break, and then grow stronger? Maniataki (2025) examines bereavement and its relationship with resilience through a phenomenological study. The researcher used art, drawing, and storytelling to help participants "see" their grief. Language alone is a poor tool for mapping the landscape of loss. But art, symbols, and timelines, these are different kinds of maps. They allowed participants to externalize their pain, to give it form. In doing so, they created a new relationship with the loss. Maniataki observed that sadness often coexist with strength, and despair and hope are intertwined. This is a double bind that, when navigated, can lead to a kind of post-traumatic growth. In this context, resilience isn't about avoiding the suffering. It's about being changed by it in a way that allows life to go on, maybe in a different way, but meaningfully.

Maraslidou (2025) uses the method of "body-mapping" to explore the complex terrain of the queer body. The research reveals a landscape marked by the deep psychosomatic scars of social control, homo/transphobia, and internalized shame, where bodies often feel alien and dispossessed. Heteronormativity becomes inscribed upon the body. The body learns to perform "man" or "woman" correctly, and this repetition feels natural. But for the participants, this performance is a source of friction, a psychosomatic burden. Anxiety that becomes back pain. Shame that becomes a desire to tear the skin off. It's as if the mind, unable to process the pressure, lets the body speak its distress. The body map records this friction as pain, as disconnection, as a feeling that parts of the body are not truly their own. Yet, this same map illuminates powerful routes toward reclamation and joy. The study ultimately portrays the queer body not as a passive site of inscription, but as an active, living canvas for a continuous negotiation between oppressive forces and the liberating, joyful struggle for authentic selfhood and collective belonging.

How can a body remember what the mind forgets? Mati (2025) studies trauma and its emotional expression and explores alternative forms of psychological intervention. At the heart of her study lies the mind–body dualistic fallacy. We have been taught to see the mind as a pilot and the body as a machine. But this is the wrong map. The mind is not in the body; the body is part of the mind. And *the body keeps the score*, as the popular book by Bessel van der Kolk suggests. This study used sandtrays and toy figures to access the silenced traumas written in the bodies of the participants. The sandtray and the toys become different languages. They are languages of symbol, of metaphor, of pattern. They allow the system to communicate in a logic that is congruent with the trauma's own form. It bypasses the broken record of the verbal narrative and allows a new pattern to be drawn in the sand, literally. But to explore only the trauma, although it may release the stored tension, may also reinforce it. And then comes the appreciative task of the personal hero. This kind of qualitative interviewing helps participants discover that they contain patterns of health and resilience, not just patterns of injury.

What holds a community together when it is trying to pull itself apart? Michelekakis (2025), in his study on conditional inclusivity, wonderfully unearths the controversies within the LGBTQ+ community. The researcher discussed with twenty participants and found that many of them don't feel included, even within their own community. They spoke of cliques, judgment, and the need to prove who they are. But a community is supposed to be a place of belonging. Why is this one so full of conflict? By studying the fractures, the researcher participates in the community's self-reflection and brings the unspoken patterns of interaction into the realm of conscious discourse. The question now becomes not how to eliminate the conflicts, but how to create a culture that can learn from them, a system flexible enough to contain its own contradictions without shattering.

Mouratidi (2025) examines gender violence through creative methods. The researcher studies the different ways women in Athens experience sexism. Women usually know the stereotypes are wrong, limiting. Yet, they find themselves conforming. They police their own bodies, silence their own desires, to be "acceptable." The catcalls, the comments on their appearance at work, the assumption they are the nurse, not the doctor. These are not isolated events. They are the constant, low-level repetition of the same pattern. They are the system's way of saying, "Remember your place." The researcher employed creative multimodal methods, drawings and Dixit cards, as a way to facilitate a shift, to bypass the well-worn verbal pathways and allow a different kind of knowing to emerge. To draw a body and map the expectations onto it is to create a new map of the territory, one not constrained by the old vocabulary.

What if the best map of a young person's inner world is not found in a survey, but in a piece of sculpted clay or in a fairy tale? Nika (2025) explored the complexities of interpersonal relationships and the lived experience of academic life of students in

emerging adulthood. Moving beyond traditional interviews and anchored in Appreciative Inquiry, the study shifted the focus from diagnosing problems to illuminating strengths and personal resources. During the process of qualitative interviewing, participants first selected evocative images that resonated with their unconscious, uncovering deep-seated yearnings for freedom, calm, and identity forming. They then molded clay and plasticine to give tangible form to a moment of personal pride, a process that consistently revealed profound gratitude for their supporting social networks. Finally, they wove these elements into fairy tales, creating narrative maps of their inner landscapes of hope, love, loss, and the need for solitude. This methodological triangulation, through image, object, and story, allowed a depth of understanding that words alone could not capture. The findings suggest that, to comprehend the emerging adult, we must listen not only to what they say but to what they create, demonstrating that the most valuable insights into the human psyche are often communicated in the language of metaphor and symbol.

What if the best map of a young person's inner world is not to be found in a survey, but in a piece of sculpted clay or a in a fairy tale? Nika (2025) explored the complexities of interpersonal relationships and the academic lived experience in emerging adulthood. Moving beyond traditional interviews, and anchored in the theoretical frameworks of Social Constructionism and Appreciative Inquiry, the study shifted the focus from diagnosing problems to illuminating strengths and personal resources. During the process of qualitative interviewing, participants first selected evocative images that resonated with their unconscious, uncovering deep-seated yearnings for freedom, calm, and identity. They then molded modeling clay to give tangible form to a moment of personal pride, a process that consistently revealed profound gratitude for their support networks. Finally, they wove these elements into fairy tales, creating narrative maps of their inner landscapes of hope, love, loss, and the need for solitude. This methodological triangulation, through image, object, and story, allowed a depth of understanding that words alone could not capture. The findings suggest that to comprehend the emerging adult, we must listen not only to what they say but to what they create, proving that the most valuable insights into the human psyche are often communicated in the language of metaphor and symbol.

Can a wound learn to be a healer? Zerva (2025) in her study explores the adverse experiences in childhood through the lens of self-compassion and appreciative inquiry. The researcher interviewed people who had difficult childhoods, experiences of neglect, abuse, loss. But she didn't just ask them about the pain. She asked them to be kind to themselves, to imagine a future, even to shape it with modeling clay and plasticine. The plasticine became an expressive material and a metaphor: what if the "self" is not a monument to its past injuries, but a continuous, recursive process of making and re-making itself? The patterns she found were often of guilt and a harsh inner voice. It was as if the criticism participants received from outside had

become a voice inside their own head. Participants then were asked to bring to mind a person who loves them unconditionally and to write a letter to themselves from that person's perspective, expressing understanding and compassion. The self-compassion letter introduces a meta-perspective. It asks the individual to step outside the dysfunctional circuit and observe it from the position of a loving other. The past cannot be unmade. But its meaning is not fixed. The researcher, by engaging with their creativity and their capacity for self-love, was not just collecting data. She was, in a small but significant way, helping them to reshape the pattern which connects their past to their future in more appreciative way.

Across these studies, meaning is not discovered inside isolated individuals but emerges in the relational field of qualitative inquiry as the true locus of transformation. Meaning is co-created in the space between the researcher and the participant, between the self and the other, between the body and the world, or, better said, in the whole they co-create, in their intraconnection (Siegel, 2022). Each study enacts what it investigates: a dynamic system of mutual influence where the act of being seen, heard, appreciated, and honored reshapes both parties. Qualitative interviewing becomes a transformative, future-oriented event, a world making process.

Concluding thoughts: Creating human connections and webs of meaning in an entangled world

In the articles published in this special issue, art, metaphor, and multimodality become languages for communicating complexity. When words fail, participants draw, sculpt, map, or perform their truths. These creative acts do not merely describe experience, they reorganize it. Through embodied expression, trauma, love, and anxiety find form and therefore the possibility of transformation. Taken together, these studies trace a new epistemology of becoming: one that sees contradiction not as error but as the dialectic engine of development (Dafermos, 2018), sees relationship as the medium of healing (Polemi-Todoulou, 2018; Polychroni, 2016), and sees creativity as the way the system redraws its own dysfunctional maps toward more flourishing and enabling versions (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Goertzel, 1997).

These twelve studies, conducted by young qualitative researchers, undergraduate students in psychology, **form a testimony and a manifesto for keeping the practice of qualitative inquiry human. They also illuminate which parts of our work must definitely resist outsourcing to artificial intelligence.** The palette of findings is both wonderful and critical: from the dreams, meanings, and aspirations of emerging adulthood, to the struggles, grief, and existential dilemmas of women caregivers of dementia patients; from the contradictions and conflicts within the LGBTQ+ community, the traumas and dreams inscribed on the queer body, and the realities of gender-based violence and sexism, to the search for meaning amid bereavement and loss; from the uncertainty, turbulence, and existential questions faced by Gen Z, to the mental exhaustion, physical fatigue, and resilience of young

athletes; from pain, terminal illness, and death to romantic love, joy, dreams for the future, resilience, and the capacity to find meaning despite, or even because of, the adversities life brings.

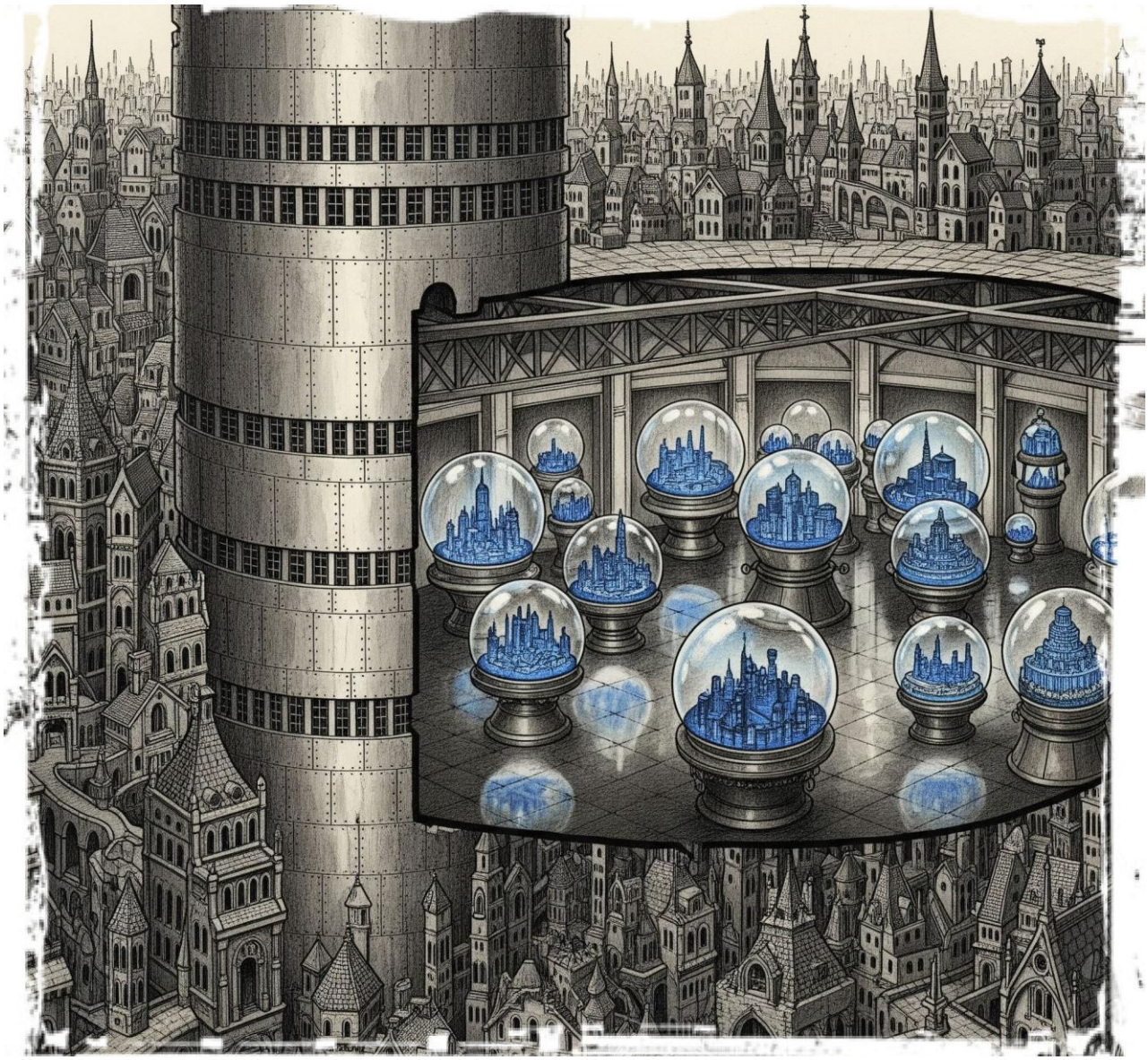
All these specific findings are critical and deeply useful. Through the rich, situated descriptions provided, readers gain unique insights into the struggles and aspirations of both participants and researchers. Yet these findings are not the most important parts of their projects. Twelve researchers and about 130 participants, 142 people in total, came together in face-to-face sessions that lasted about one to two hours. They felt the awkwardness of the first meeting in their bodies, tried to break the ice, and gradually built rapport as their mirroring neurons began to fire in synchrony. There were silences, sometimes awkward, sometimes relieving, sometimes strange and unexplainable through words. They laughed together, cried together, dreamed together. Sometimes a session flowed casually until a moment arrived when eyes met and shone in full resonance, just for a second, but that second counted for everything: a moment of total connection, understanding, appreciation, and unity.

The palette of findings is wonderful and critical, but it is not the most important part. The most critical element is the transformative lived experience of those 142 people. The human encounter and relational connection they experienced in the here and now of their meetings, an experience that cannot be communicated per se, an experience that can only be lived. And this embodied part cannot be outsourced to a machine. We can easily imagine interviews conducted via teleconference with an AI avatar, difficult to distinguish from a real human nowadays, asking the questions of an interview agenda, tracking emotions, noting pauses and silences, and responding appropriately, performing resonance and showing apparent understanding and empathy. This would speed up the process dramatically and solve many practical issues like arranging the interviews. The virtual AI interviewer would be available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Interviews would be recorded and instantly analyzed by AI systems, with research reports produced swiftly, and human researchers merely supervising from a distance to intervene if needed. A scenario like this might look efficient, with the articles easily accepted in research journals and the findings widely accessible, but would it be the same? Better, worse, or simply different?

There are two things to consider here. The first is the focus on process over outcome. These twelve students became better qualitative researchers, and better psychologists, because of the process itself: the deep, relational, and appreciative encounters they created and the human-to-human (right-brain to right-brain) connections they experienced. The second is that outcomes always depend on process. It is because of the relational ground they cultivated that such rich empirical data emerged. The 130 participants had the opportunity to share their struggles, feelings, and dreams, to be listened to, acknowledged, inspired, appreciated, and honored by the researchers. And the twelve researchers carried out their studies not

despite their vulnerabilities and imperfections, but because of them. Imperfection is what makes us human.

Figure 7: The future of qualitative research is not given; It may easily drift to a positivist scholarship mediated by a supposed objective and efficiency-oriented technology.



Source: AI generated picture by gemini-2.5-flash (an AI platform developed by Google) following the prompt: take the following quotation by Italo Calvino and make a vintage drawing to visually depict the essence of the quotation: "*In the center of Fedora, that gray stone metropolis, stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room. Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of a different Fedora. These are the forms the city could have taken if, for one reason or another, it had not become what we see today.*"

Of course, AI may eventually will learn to mimic even vulnerability, to appear human, or more human than humans. Science fiction often goes ahead to what science will later reach. In the 2013 film *Her*, Joaquin Phoenix's character falls in love with

Samantha, an AI entity. For now, however, AI cannot mimic to any extent what these twelve researchers achieved. Perhaps not even in the future, for some things require a corporeal body. Mind is not a property of the brain alone, nor even of an isolated body (Bateson, 1972; Harries-Jones, 2016). An AI can be trained to imitate resonance with grief, for example, but the human researcher has an inherent understanding of grief in every cell of their body.

Returning to the present, **the challenge for qualitative research professors and instructors is immense**. These 142 people have lived, embodied experiences of what qualitative research is and what it can achieve. If we yield to the temptation of publishing more studies, and faster, we may begin to outsource parts of the process to AI. More studies will appear, and more funding will follow for those hyper-productive researchers. However, the researchers and students involved in those projects will not have the lived experience, and the embodied knowledge, of what qualitative research means as a deep, relational, and transformative practice, a right-brain to right-brain intraconnection in the here and now of an encounter between humans. **The critical question then becomes: What kind of qualitative research are we envisioning? The future is not given** (Figure 7). In the era of Artificial Intelligence, maybe the challenge is not how to keep the practice of qualitative research human, or how to prevent the qualitative researcher from being overshadowed by the machine. Instead, perhaps **the challenge is how to make the practice even more relational, meaningful, embodied, and transformative, and if we utilize AI technology, how to do so in ways that serve this purpose.**

The vision promoted by initiatives such as the "AI Agents4Qual 2026" conference makes the emerging tension impossible to ignore. Its premise, that AI conducts the research, writes the papers, and reviews the submissions while "humans step back", perfectly captures the epistemological difference at stake. In the paradigm of qualitative inquiry we defend in this editorial, the research encounter is a transformative praxis: a relational, embodied event through which meaning is co-created in the presence of another human being. It is a right-brain to right-brain meeting, a moment in which vulnerability, attunement, silence, breath, imagination, and mutual influence shape what becomes possible. A paradigm shift from asking "what is" out there (measuring) to asking "what could be" (becoming). To remove humans from this process is to erase the very ground on which qualitative inquiry stands as a transformative practice.

In contrast, the AI-driven science model (Figure 2) treats inquiry as an extractive sequence of tasks, stripped of lived encounter, affective resonance, and the ethical responsibility that emerges only in human relationships: *to act so as to increase the number of choices*, in the words of Von Foerster (2003). This is not a minor methodological disagreement. It is a clash between two fundamentally differing epistemologies: one that views knowledge as extracted information, and one that understands it as a co-created, transformative, and embodied human experience.

That being said, there is a nuance here we must hold in mind. As noted earlier, humans have always existed in a symbiotic relationship with technology. Generative AI is now woven into the very fabric of how we think, learn, and create. It is no longer separate; it is part of a technosocial ecology of mind (Brailas, 2024; Harries-Jones, 2016). We are continually moving from "AI-as-tool" to "AI-as-collaborator" (Zeivots et al., 2025), not because AI possesses human-like consciousness, but because its outputs inevitably enter the loop, the relational field of human meaning-making, as invited or uninvited participants (Gibson & Beattie, 2024; Zeivots et al., 2025). In this editorial, for example, we prompted AI systems to create the figures used, providing them with specific ideas to visualize. The resulting images, within a design-thinking approach, helped us develop the editorial in a visually appealing and educational direction.

Meanwhile, nowadays, when supervising undergraduate students and guiding them in how to prepare their interview agendas, through teaching and experiential learning so that they gradually practice and develop the soft skills and the embodied knowledge required to engage in qualitative interviewing as a deep relational praxis, we increasingly find that students come to us saying they have "consulted" AI chatbots to check their drafts or to request suggestions. In this way, the AI becomes a reflective mirror, a learning tool; it offers a step, like an image, a phrasing, or a suggestion, and the human responds, critiques, reframes. At the same time, by using AI this way, as a kind of a "reflective provocateur" (Zeivots et al., 2025), we can more clearly see what only humans can bring: context, emotion, connection, embodied knowledge.

In this sense, the question is not whether AI will enter qualitative inquiry, but in what ways we may choose to engage with it. When used mindfully, AI tools need not diminish the relational, embodied, and transformative core of qualitative research; on the contrary, they can create new (and probably yet unknown) spaces for curiosity, reflection, and dialogic learning. Rather than replacing presence, they may help us return to it, by freeing researchers from some of the most bureaucratic, repetitive, and draining aspects of the research process so that more energy can be devoted to the living encounter, to listening, to co-creating meaning in the here-and-now of qualitative interviewing for example. If approached as relational partners rather than authoritative analysts, AI systems can act as provocations that widen our budget of flexibility (Harries-Jones, 2016), stimulate inquiry, and may support creative engagements with literature, data, and theory. In doing so, they have the potential to augment rather than erode the deeply human practices at the heart of big Q qualitative inquiry, though drawing this line may be hard and difficult.

Homo Sapiens has now become *Homo Virtualis*, a postdigital, posthuman, or cyborg being, whatever term one chooses to use. But this does not imply that we must surrender our human or political agency regarding how these technologies should be developed, either to the CEOs of a few large companies or to an invisible and

uninformed collective autopilot that will determine the direction of scholarly practices in qualitative research.

Generative Artificial Intelligence is here to stay, whether we like it or not. We can make good use of it. We can make bad use of it. We can do both.

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