

Posthuman Conceptualisations of Young People's Sexualities

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ABSTRACT

Posthumanism holds a direct focus on materiality and centralises the role of nonhuman, agents in the understanding of phenomena. The aim of this paper is to locate the understanding of young people's sexualities within posthuman perspectives. Specifically, the paper refers mainly to Karen Barad's work to conceptualise the understanding of young people's sexual selves. The presence of numerous sexuality discourses that surround their lives is acknowledged as a starting point in the understanding of their sexual relations. The recognition that matter and discursive formations in language are intertwined has led to a conceptual shift that is influencing conceptualisations of young people's sexualities, and how research on young people's sexual selves is framed and conducted. The paper argues that the posthuman turn provides a productive framework for understanding the multi-faceted complexities surrounding the sexualities of young people.

1. Introduction

Posthumanism is an evolving area of study, which challenges traditional Western notions of humanism; particularly ideas about human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism, which place human beings at the centre of the world (Braidotti, 2019). The posthuman paradigm critiques humanism, and the historical and cultural biases embedded within traditional humanism, such as its focus on the white, male, Western subject as the universal standard of humanity (Braidotti, 2019). Posthumanism is emerging as a multifaceted field of study that raises important questions about the role of materiality and technology in young people's lives, the nature of their relationship with the world and their interconnectedness with living and non-living matter. The aim of this paper is to explore and discuss these attributes of posthumanism with reference to the effects of materiality in the understanding of young people's sexualities. Youth sexualities refer to the diverse ways young people experience, express, and understand their sexual attraction, feelings, identities, and behaviour (Talbut, 2018). The paper aims to offer a theoretical contribution to the body of literature that explores and examines young people's sexualities, by drawing on a posthuman approach. Posthuman conceptualizations on young people's sexualities can address gaps in understanding the significance which materiality has in adolescents' sexual expression, by focusing for example on digital technologies, music, sexting, online dating, and objects such as contraceptive means, make-up, clothes, accessories, and sex toys. This focus is useful to understand how objects and spaces actively shape young people's sexual exploration, identity formation, and

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relationships. Understanding young people's sexualities through a posthuman and new materialist lens is useful to examine the multiple relationships and entanglements that shape their experiences, including peer cultures, family dynamics, online communities, and broader socio-political contexts. This can address gaps in understanding the complex entanglement surrounding young people's sexual lives and the influence of various relational dynamics. Additionally, posthumanism provides a deeper understanding of the variance and multiplicity of young people's sexualities, including experiences of gender fluidity, diverse attractions, and non-binary identities that may be overlooked by binary frameworks. This is because posthumanism challenges binary categories like male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, nature/culture, which could have constrained traditional sexuality research.

The focus on posthumanism grants space to not only acknowledge the complexities surrounding young people's sexualities, but also to study how these are connected to multiple other phenomena, as they are lived out. The paper also explores how this interconnectedness is reflected in the ways young people experience dating, romance, intimacy and sex, as they occur in the context of human relatedness. A posthuman lens reveals the underlying materialities that make up young people's desire for human connection that marks important landmarks for their growth as persons.

The paper makes specific reference to Karen Barad's work (1999, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2014) to conceptualise young people's sexual behaviour and expression. Barad's works, which include her groundbreaking book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) put forward the notions of materiality, entanglements, intra-action, diffraction and agential realism, which are deemed useful to conceptualise young people's sexualities. As a point of departure, the paper acknowledges numerous sexuality discourses that permeate young people's lives and shape their sexual behaviour. It then argues that discursive formations are not sufficient enough to understand young people's sexual selves, and goes on to explore the contribution, which the posthuman embrace can make towards a broader understanding of young people's sexualities. Although the attention on materiality is central to the posthuman understanding of young people's sexualities, the human dimension of the 'anthropocene' is still considered relevant and valid to conceptualise this important dimension in young people's lives. The posthuman paradigm does not reduce the human body to 'a thing', but also recognises human agency as being constituted by an uncountable number of emotions, thoughts, and situations. Barad's epistemology has however been critiqued for "its sense of objectivity and dismissal of the centrality of the human" (Calvert-Minor, 2014, p. 123). Braunmühl (2018) argues that by primarily focusing on the active dimension of matter and agency, Barad's perspectives inadvertently reinforce a traditional "masculinist" perspective that devalues passivity. This devaluation is deeply ingrained in Western philosophical thought and contributes to hierarchical power structures, and to reinstating hierarchical oppositions, particularly the subject/object and mind/matter dualisms (Braunmühl, 2018). Nevertheless, Barad's works have been influential in demarcating research pathways to think about young people and their worlds beyond a discursive and anthropocentric framework (Taguchi & Palmer, 2013), in particular with regards to gender and sexuality (Ingram, 2022, 2024, 2025; Cassar, 2019a; Renold & Ringrose, 2017a; Ringrose & Coffey, 2016, Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015; Allen, 2015; Juelskjaer, 2013; Renold & Ringrose, 2011), and sexuality education (Ingram & Allen, 2025; Renold et al., 2024; Gunnarsson & Ceder, 2023; Cassar, 2018a). This paper aims to add to this body of knowledge, and to youth studies by contributing insights on how notions of young people's sexualities can be reconfigured and re-contextualised in the light of posthumanist thinking. It demonstrates how the conceptual shift brought about by this thinking is considered useful for widening research agendas and methods on the sexualities of young people.

2. The Posthuman Embrace

Posthumanism centralises the role of nonhuman, material, and natural factors in the understanding of phenomena. It decenters the human and challenges the idea that human beings are the sole or primary focus of moral, ethical, and philosophical concerns (Braidotti, 2018). This implies recognising the agency and importance of non-human animals, technological entities, and ecological systems (Barad, 2007). Posthuman thoughts have been diffused in various fields of study and developed in different directions; some of which led to “new materialisms” (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018; Fox & Alldred 2017; Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2012). The posthuman is not a monolithic entity. It encompasses a multifaceted concept that includes diverse perspectives, including the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and sexuality. There are numerous posthumanist positions on issues related to gender, sexuality, power and equality, which hold radically different viewpoints (Crellin & Harris, 2021). Underlying this multiplicity there are common threads that make up the posthuman fabric. These primarily revolve around the embrace of materiality in the understanding of social phenomena.

Kumm et al. (2019) affirm that “matter itself is far from dumb or mute” and that “we must affirm the vitality of all matter, its autopoietic capacities to self-form, self-style a future in which we may not recognize ourselves as such” (p. 343). Posthumanism explores the potential of technology to enhance or transform human existence, and draws attention to the blurring of boundaries between the human and the material. This can include discussions of artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and cybernetics. This perspective emphasizes the need to consider the impact of human actions on the wider world, and calls for ethical responsibility towards living and non-living matter (Barad, 2007). Posthumanism emphasizes the fluidity and plasticity of identities (Elliott, 2019). These characteristics of the posthuman turn have implications on the ways that sexualities of young people are conceptualised.

Youth is mainly understood as a stage in life marked by significant transitions, during which significant developments related to sexuality take place (Hegde et al., 2022). This period is usually described as being characterised by young people's sense of wonder, excitement, curiosity and exploration of their sexuality, and also by problems they could confront, such as those related to risky sexual behaviours, sexually acquired infections, casual sex, sexual activity under the influence of illegal substances, unplanned pregnancy, and stigma surrounding sexual minority youth (Hegde et al., 2022). A posthuman lens regards these characteristics as being shaped by dominant discourses, and the collation of materialities that reconfigure the understandings of young people's sexualities in ways that do not define them as a unified, universal aspect of adolescence. The posthuman lens sees persons of all ages passing through similar sexual experiences that young people go through. Renold and Ringrose “conceptualize the blurring of generational and sexual binaries” located in their data, through new materialist, “Deleuzian notions of ‘becomings’, ‘assemblages’ and ‘schizoid subjectivities’ ” (2011, p. 389). Data from quantitative and qualitative methods show that the challenges and difficulties of 18–23 year old young people are not theirs only, but also “... ultimately problems of our entire culture and society” (Smith, 2011, p. 11).

Posthuman perspectives challenge the notion of adolescence as a social construct that gained global recognition. Posthuman conceptualisations of adolescence regard it as an “assemblage” constituted by various non-human components that keep shaping how young people's sexualities are perceived and lived out. There is however, strong resistance towards theoretical perspectives, which question traditional notions of adolescence. Teachers in particular show this resistance when acknowledging youth as sexual beings (Sarigianides, 2014). The discourse of sexually innocent youth is strongly associated with “promises of the

happiness to come from a life lived according to social norms that include youths' sexual innocence" (Sarigianides, 2014, p. 1061).

The subjective and personal element of sexualities is entangled with "matter that matter" (Barad, 2003). From this perspective, sexual subjectivity is not only constituted through gender, ethnicity, ability and other structural relations of power, but also through materialities that bring it about. Young people's sexualities are regarded as being comprised of assemblages made up of bodies and assembled relations that are enmeshed with dominant strictures of idealised femininity and masculinity (Ringrose & Coffey, 2016). These notions are not passive and "may enable disruptions to oppressive norms" by determining what adolescent bodies can and cannot do (Ringrose & Coffey, 2016, p. 190). Posthuman positionings about the notions of young people's sexualities regard sexual agency as coming into being incidentally through conditions and situations that unfold in spacetime, depending on materialities and human subjectivities. This perspective conceptualises young people's sexualities as being potentially expansive, and open to possibilities, and acknowledges the many facets of young people's sexual selves. The exploration of space and time "is a way of developing new perspectives on the biographies, identities, and social inequalities that shape young lives across the globe" (Farrugia et al., 2024, p. 1). Young people's human bodies relate to other bodies on different levels and through various elements:

Sexual expression entails the coming together of bodies, and is constituted by the inevitable entanglements of the human with materiality. The posthuman perspective questions dualistic thinking that puts materiality on one side, and the anthropocene on the other, as if the two were separate. According to Barad, "posthumanism marks a refusal to take the distinction between 'human' and 'nonhuman' for granted, and to found analysis on this presumably fixed and inherent set of categories" (2007, p. 32). The recognition of this enmeshment between matter and human enriches the understanding of young people's sexualities, and what is said about the significance they attach to this aspect in their lives. Young people's sexual expression forms part of the process of "worlding" (Barad, 2007, p. 181), which Barad refers to when explaining the entangled nature of bodies (2007, p. 160). Making "worlding" possible is an ethical call in itself:

ethics is not simply about responsible actions in relation to human experiences of the world; rather, it is a question of material entanglements and how each intra-action matters in the reconfiguring of these entanglements, that is, it is a matter of the ethical call that is embodied in the very worlding of the world (p. 160).

3. Conceptual Shifts

Young people's sexual selves are manifested through myriad ways, which include material interventions and agents, and occur in specific material contexts. Young people's personal and subjective understandings and experiences of dating, sexuality, pleasure, safety, reproduction, sexual health, break-ups, care, belonging, wellbeing and love interlock with social dictates that affect their perceptions, decision making and sexual behaviour. Discursive formations operating within these aspects of sexual behaviour affect young people's thinking, expectations and experiences. Examples of such sexuality discourses include the slut discourse, abstinence discourse, heteronormative discourses, risks discourses, erotic discourse, homo/bi/trans/intersex phobia discourses, and sexual morality discourse among others (Cassar, 2019b). These are enmeshed with discourses of choice, emancipation, equality and individualism.

The realisation about the presence and power of sexuality discourses has contributed considerably to our understanding of young people's sexualities, but the limitations of the

“productivity” of discourse (Barad, 2003, p. 827) became evident when scholars of various disciplines were confronted with understanding social problems in a broader way:

Scholars in feminist studies, science studies, cultural studies, and critical social theory are among those who struggle with the difficulty of coming to terms with the “weightiness” of the world. On the one hand, there is an expressed desire to recognize and reclaim matter and its kindred spirits (e.g., the body) exiled from (or swallowed up by) the familiar and comforting domains of culture, mind, and history, not simply to altruistically advocate on behalf of the subaltern but in the hopes of finding a way to account for our own finitude. Can we identify the limits and constraints, if not the grounds, of discourse-knowledge in its productivity? (Barad, 2007, p. 183, parenthesis in original).

Foucault’s “*discursive essentialism*” (Shilling, 2003, p. 71, italics in original) has been critiqued with regards to its “reductionist tendencies, whereby our active, physical and material bodies vanish and become forever lost in discourse” (Shilling, 2003, p. 71). Foucault’s emphasis on disciplinary power “exercised from outside” (Turner, 1984, p. 245) has minimized the attention on our “authority, possession and occupation of a personalised body through sensuous experience” (Turner, 1984, p. 245). Although poststructuralist and posthuman workings of discourse can be used as an analytical tool to examine power relations, postmodernism has been critiqued for not offering solutions to crisis and social disorder (Cole, 2001). This view has been counteracted by other scholars who hold that postmodern thinking can serve as a powerful agent for social change (eg. Atkinson, 2001). Discourses in the Foucaultian sense “are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (Weedon 1987, p. 108). Barad (2007, p. 65) claims that the relationship between material phenomena and discursive formations is not articulated by Foucault in his explanation of the connection between power and knowledge. Foucault’s emphasis on disciplinary power does not include “an account of the body’s historicity in which its very materiality plays an *active* role in the workings of power” (Barad, 2007, p. 65, emphasis in origin). Barad affirms that “crucial to understanding the workings of power is an understanding of the nature of power in the fullness of its materiality” (2007, p. 66). From a posthumanist perspective, power relations cannot be grasped only through the meanings of texts, but are traced through the analysis of actual relations embedded in human interaction. The nature of power’s productivity is also not limited to the social world, but is “rethought in terms of its materializing potential” (Barad, 2007, p. 210). A genealogy of nonhuman as well as human practices is possible, according to Barad (2007, p. 200).

Posthumanism challenges the notion of the postmodernist self, understood as being fragmented by a multiplicity of social constructs. Posthumanism “attempts to show how postmodern cultural theory, even while claiming otherwise, has made use of a conceptualization of “post-” that is dualistic” (Barad, 2007, p. 110). In terms of conceptualising and dealing with the physical, biological and living nature of bodies, poststructuralism has also been limited (Ahmed, 2008, p. 25). Posthumanism however, does not abandon previous “lessons learned from the linguistic turn” (Alaimo & Heckman 2008, p. 6). Matter and discursive formations in language are intertwined. Barad calls for a “conceptual shift” (2007, p. 139) in social theory based on the understanding that social and personal practices and behaviour are material-discursive agents. Barad’s notion on the enmeshment of matter and discourse is based on the understanding that everything is interconnected: “discourses and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another; rather, *the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in*

the dynamics of intra-activity" (Barad, 2007, p. 152, emphasis in original). Intra-activity refers to ways things come into being through different factors. This entails an ongoing process of ongoing intra-activity by means of the intra-action of multiple material-discursive entities (Barad, 2007, p. 210).

Intra-action signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual "interaction", which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the "distinct" agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements (Barad, 2007, p. 33).

From this perspective, a material-discursive exploration of young people's sexualities does more than analyze what is said. Young people's sexualities are constituted intra-actively. Posthuman perspectives consider young people's sexual lives as being linked with phenomena that are not independent entities but are joined with processes that continuously shapes their identities in their "differential becoming" (Barad, 2003, p. 818). Sexuality is a powerful force that enables new becomings and creations through intra-activity. Young people's sexualities are constituted by multiple entanglements acting within broad discursive arenas that bring together the personal, social, cultural, political and posthuman. Young people's sexualities are comprised of bodies made up of physiological, emotional and mental processes interacting with each other. These components are intertwined with young people's personality, socio-cultural contexts, geographical regions, past experiences, sexual behaviour norms, and possibly other multiple relations, specific events and circumstances that bring people together sexually. These elements make up the "sexuality-assemblage" (Fox & Alldred, 2013, p. 775). Issues surrounding young people's sexualities, such as the search for happiness through sexuality (Sarigianides, 2014), body image (Ringrose & Coffey, 2016), self-esteem around sexuality (Cassar, 2013), rape culture (Susanti et al., 2023), heteronormativity (Cassar, 2015), "queering" (Vicars, 2012), contraception and safe sex (Cassar, 2019b), disability (Azzopardi Lane, Callus 2014), sexuality education (Gunnarsson & Ceder, 2023), and others are laden with regulatory discourses that are intertwined with values and ethical principles. A posthumanist perspective recognises that "facts and values are enacted together-apart within a relational set of interdependency and hence are always present although temporarily more forcefully and ephemeral" (Gunnarsson & Ceder, 2023, p. 853).

A posthumanist approach to studying young people's sexualities and human relatedness emphasises an ongoing becoming and performance of the self (Barad, 2007). The centrality of performativity, as outlined by Butler (1999), has been re-examined in terms of posthuman material-discursive intra-actions (Barad, 2007). This approach helps us to rethink young people's intimate and sexual relations, by taking in to account the agency of non-material elements. The intra-actions which produce young people's sexual desire and behaviour are understood as constituting acts of performativity, which demonstrate reconfigurations of young people's personal, social and material worlds. Young people's sexual relating offers them "possibilities for becoming" (Barad, 2007, p. x) more knowledgeable about meaningful relationships and attachments. This could entail engagement with repeated and ongoing "performances" in their dating experiences and intimate relationships. Knowing "is not a singular event that happens in space and time" (Barad 2014, p. 169). Performative acts in the Baradian sense (2007) sustain and maintain the becoming of personhood during adolescence.

4. Young People's Sexual Expression as Agential Activity

Young people do not exist in separation from the materialities that constitute their personal and social worlds, but are immersed in “agential activity” (Barad, 1999), made up of spontaneous, responsive movements that signal an intermingling and unfolding of events that take material form. Barad's notion of agential realism (1999) refers to a type of realism that does not revolve around the idea that there is a world “out there”. It takes into account that reality exists as a result of the human and non-human matter that are part of it, and which comes into force through “the ongoing ebb and flow of agency” (Barad, 2007, p. 140). Agential realism accounts for “the material nature of practices and how they come to matter” (Barad, 2007, pp. 44-45). It is based on the understanding that all parts which constitute matter depend on each other for their existence and the distinction between interiority/exteriority is rejected.

Agential realism theorizes agency in a way that acknowledges that there is a sense in which ‘the world kicks back’ (i.e. non human and cyborgian forms of agency in addition to human ones) without assuming some innocent, symmetrical form of interaction between knower and known (Barad, 1999, p. 3, parenthesis in original).

Agential realism reconceptualizes the understanding of young people's sexualities and emphasises the productive characteristics of natural and social forces in the materialization of sexual behaviour. This framework moves away from the nature-culture dualism and avoids privileging discursive over material concerns. It sees openings “for agentially reconfiguring who or what comes to matter, and makes evident a much larger space of possibilities for change” (Barad, 2007, p. 35). This kind of realism emphasizes that intra-activity has agential effects that form and produce agencies that are not fixed or demarcated. An agential conception of the dynamic materialization of all bodies provides “for much more intimate, pervasive, and profound reconfigurings of bodies, power, knowledge, and their linkage than anticipated by Foucault's notion of biopower (which might have been adequate to eighteenth-century practices, but not contemporary ones)” (Barad, 2007, p. 200, parenthesis in original). When events, experiences and things are classified and taken out from the interconnected universe, they are perceived as being separate. Methods of categorisation which fail to grasp the inseparability of things in the universe make what Barad calls “agential cuts” (2007), but even so “what is on the other side of the agential cut is never separate from us” (Barad, as cited in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, p. 69).

5. Researching Young People's Sexualities

The conceptual shift that encompasses the role of matter in human interactions, has influenced how research on the sexualities of young people is conceptualised and conducted. Posthumanist scholarship reflects the ontological and epistemological shifts in research practices that focus on young people's sexualities. These shifts demonstrate the decentralisation of binary thinking and anthropocentric accounts of young people's sexual behaviour. Posthuman sexualities are characterised by shifts from binarism to entangled connectivities in multiple aspects of life (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 98–100), that determine young people's sexual selves.

Research based on the principles of posthumanism not only examines how language is constituted by meanings, but also foregrounds the role of matter in the making of sexual selves. The posthuman turn enables researchers to claim the importance of materiality in gender and sexuality studies by drawing on perspectives that validate non-human aspects of

young people's lives. The material dimension of research “creates and gives form to the discursive, and vice versa” (Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2012, p. 91). The study of matter and its relation to meaning making in the understanding of young people's sexuality takes us out of the comfort zone of traditional youth studies, and related disciplines.

Researching the worlds of young people with regards their sexualities is an ethical call in itself. In her arguments on new paradigms for a “(post)humanist ethics”, Thiele outlines the idea about developing “a thought-practice in which concepts are not abstraction *from* the world, but an active force *of* this world—and thus always/already implicated in and concerned with world(ing): practicing *and* envisioning specific practices for this world” (2014, p. 203, emphasis in original). Research studies, which explore young people's romantic, intimate and sexual relations create opportunities for new inquiries, and for understanding young people's journeys in the exploration of their sexual selves. Research based on posthuman principles conceptualises young people's bodies and surrounding objects as being relational, and not as “occupying distinct and delimited spaces” (Fox & Alldred, 2018, p. 5). The researcher who studies young people's sexualities through posthuman perspectives is “decentered” and “no longer the focus, but merely one part of an entangled material-discursive formation collectively producing the “results” of the inquiry” (Strom et al., 2018, p. 1). Rather than being considered a limitation, this approach forges new connections to broaden knowledge “while exploring theories with an ontological view of the world as fundamentally multiple, dynamic, fluid, and co-constituted by entangled material and discursive forces” (Strom et al., 2018, p. 1). Ethical bonds between researcher and informants could be strengthened when giving attention to “matter that matters” (Barad, 2003) when dealing with crucial issues in research ethics, such as informed consent, confidentiality, minimisation of harm and when dealing with the vulnerable subject discourse.

From a posthuman perspective, data on young people's sexual behaviour is considered “alive”, and researchers' subjectivity is regarded as a constituent of the data. It is misleading to assume “some innocent, symmetrical form of interaction between knower and known” (Barad, 1999, p. 3). Ringrose and Rawlings (2015) explain that their own subjectivities constituted the very phenomena they researched when studying gender and school bullying. They drew on Barad's notion of intra-activity to show that heterosexual gender norms work through repeated performative ‘intra-action’ between non-human objects, bodies and discourses (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015).

The posthuman perspective has informed researchers on data collection methods that include objects, artefacts, photographs, poetry, films, spaces and events among others, which constitute “youth voice assemblages” (Renold et al., 2024). Data is regarded as coming into existence through various activities such as writing, reading, drawing, taking photographs, playing, dancing and walking. Researchers “think-practice” (Thiele, 2014) with the materials they engage in. For example Allen's research adopts Barad's intra-active approach carried out through the use of photographs to understand how the school experiences of LGBT students are represented:

Within the framework of intra-activity, neither narrative nor photo is seen as providing a truer representation of the reality of student-lived school experience. Rather, how we understand what that experience is “becomes” in the moment of relation between narrative and photo (Allen, 2015, p. 380).

Posthuman research methodologies have liberated researchers from traps that strictly and rigidly affirm binary thinking in the analysis of phenomena (Renold & Ringrose, 2017b). This point was made when referring to feminist materialist approaches to research that

acknowledge, but also “deterritorialize” dualisms concerning “risky ‘victims’ and abusive ‘perpetrators’, and heteronormative gender bifurcations which tether masculinity to boy bodies and femininity to girl bodies” (Renold & Ringrose, 2017b, p. 1075). Even before the posthuman turn had gained momentum, “new femininities” were already positioning “young women as agentic, goal-oriented, pleasure seeking individuals adept at reading the new world order and finding their place within it” (Kehily, 2008, p. 51).

Human and non-human relations that evolve when conducting research are collated by forces of oneness and togetherness, even when employing research approaches that are different, oppositional and contradictory to each other and when researchers themselves feel distant from the social and material phenomena they research, and when they are estranged from the informants’ worlds. The research process entails taking account of the ‘timespacemattering’ of action, events and circumstances that form part of the data, in ways that blur a rigid distinction between data gathering tools, datasets and analysis, and between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’ (Taguchi and Palmer, 2013). Young people can assume the role of co-researchers in projects, such as those examining gender and sexuality in school cultures (Rawlings, 2024).

Research practices informed by posthuman principles entail working with patterns of difference produced through one another. In a Baradian sense, posthuman research inquiries “diffract” (Barad, 2003) and “disperse methodologies in several directions at once” (Ulmer, 2017, p. 840). In the physical world diffractive waves create “many different overlapping diffraction patterns that disguise one another” (Barad, 2007, p. 75). These patterns are “fundamental constituents that make up the world” (Barad, 2007, p. 72). The concept of diffraction is useful as a research tool (Fox & Alldred, 2023). A diffractive methodology is useful for social science researchers, because it brings out entanglements and differences and makes them known through analytic methods that read different forms of data through each other (Barad, 2011, p. 445). Specifically this methodology refers to:

A method of diffractively reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition that there intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement. Diffractive readings bring inventive provocations; they are good to think with. They are respectful, detailed, ethical engagements (Barad in Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2012, p. 50).

Data on young people's sexualities can reveal “diffraction patterns”, understood as “patterns of difference that make a difference” (2007, p. 72). Diffractive readings of the data “bring inventive provocations; they are good to think with. They are respectful, detailed, ethical engagements” (Barad, cited in Dolphijn & Van Der Tuin, 2012, p. 50). A diffractive methodology “is respectful of the entanglement of ideas and other materials...” (Barad, 2007, p. 29). It makes way for researchers to become involved and co-produce “complex apparatus of knowing” (Taguchi & Palmer, 2013, p. 671). Through diffractive thinking (Barad, 2007) young people's sexualities could be understood as being marked by differences and constituted by entanglements. Differences do not obliterate understanding, but rather create something new out of the entanglements that differences make (Barad, 2007). Diffractive thinking conceives young people's sexualities as being alive, as forming part of the world’s “differential becoming” (Barad 2003, p. 829), as happening and evolving simultaneously with and according to how the self chooses to perceive and live it. A diffractive approach goes beyond the analysis of the data, and is attentive to ways of producing “new possible realities”

(Taguchi & Palmer, 2013, p. 671). It acknowledges that artefacts and materialities related to young people's sexualities have their own story to tell, which can contribute to young people's search for meaning in their desires and intimate connections.

A diffractive methodology could be challenging for social science researchers (Fox & Alldred, 2023). Research-assemblages (Fox & Alldred, 2015) are unique and could present the unexpected. For some researchers this might create a diffraction of discomfort. Fox and Alldred discuss the use of multiple readings in data analysis, and argue that the potential offered by diffractive analysis “to generate a near-infinite multiplicity of contingent – and different – conclusions from research data poses a challenge for its users to produce the kind of ‘evidence’ conventionally sought by policy-makers and practitioners” (2023, p. 95). The challenges faced by researchers not only constitute part of the research process, but are considered data. They have the potential to enrich the research, and they are considered an important part of the research-assemblage (Fox & Alldred, 2015).

6. Conclusion

As a complex and multifaceted field of study, posthumanism raises important questions about the nature of humanity, the role of technology, and our relationship with the world around us. Posthuman and new materialist perspectives offer important insights that can significantly inform youth policies by moving beyond traditional human-centered and purely social-constructivist approaches. The complex interplay of human and non-human factors, which shape adolescent sexualities can inform policies that acknowledge the multifaceted influences on young people's sexual development and experiences. In particular, youth policies can address material forces that shape the sexual behaviours of young people more directly, rather than solely focusing on individual attitudes and behaviours. Youth policymakers can draw from knowledges about the dynamic assemblages or networks of relations between bodies, technologies, discourses, and environments, in order to identify the specific factors that contribute to meaningful sexual experiences of young people, as well as those involving high risks and are detrimental to their wellbeing.

The understanding of young people's sexualities continues to develop through evolving ways within the posthuman embrace along myriad pathways that show both clarity and ambiguity. A posthuman lens captures new forms of understanding young people's sexualities through incoherent, dubious, disparate and contradictory ways. It also encourages us to think beyond traditional boundaries and to consider new possibilities for the future. These possibilities go beyond materially itself. According to Barad (2007), the attempt to conceptualise and define matter seems elusive:

But despite its substance, in the end, according to many contemporary attempts at its salvation, it is not matter that reels in the unruliness of infinite possibilities; rather, it is the very existence of finitude that gets defined as matter. Caught once again looking at mirrors, it is either the face of transcendence or our own image. It is as if there are no alternative ways to conceptualize matter: the only options seem to be the naïveté of empiricism or the same old narcissistic bedtime stories (p. 183).

This implies that it does not seem to be enough to simply study young people's sexualities by investigating the role which material things play in sexual relating. The understanding of young people's sexualities requires study on possibilities that material things offer as expressions of care, respect, and love. This important aspect of young people's lives has wider repercussions beyond the care of self and is intimately linked with the care of the other.

Sexuality education curricula can also take up this challenge and direct students to explore this dimension of matter, which leads to more fulfilling human relations (Cassar, 2018b).

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