Transhumanism

By Robert Meckin[1] and Mark Elliot

This Methods Futures Briefing focuses on transhumanism. The topic was selected by surveying various futures-related literature and chosen for the range of issues it can raise for social research methods and for its own visions of the future, particularly those related to human capacities. The briefing first outlines definitions of transhumanism. The following sections discuss transhumanist concepts, the potential social research methods-related issues that arise with transhumanism, and finally closes with a consideration methods futures in the context of transhumanism.

What is transhumanism?

Transhumanism can be thought of as a social and intellectual movement or philosophy 'premised upon the idea that human beings can use science and technology to significantly enhance their capabilities and overcome many of the limitations of human biology' (Huberman, 2020: 3). In this way, transhumanism transcends many conventional ideas about humanity and its organisation via **'technologically mediated transformation'** (More, 2013: 8). 'Weak' transhumanism argues humanity is already transhuman by virtue of its use of technologies including medicines, medical and communication devices, computers, and mechanised transport, and should extend this approach, while 'strong' transhumanism argues for a more radically transformative philosophy across bodies, relations, and politics (Sorgner, 2021).

Transhumanism has been associated with high-profile technology entrepreneurs and company founders including Peter Thiel (Paypal, Palantir), Jeff Bezos (Amazon) and Elon Musk (Tesla, SpaceX, X) (Hawkins, 2020). Transhumanism entrepreneurs and writers advocate for **libertarian politics and relaxing laws** surrounding technological innovation. It has been presented as one of the world's most dangerous ideas (Fukuyama, 2004). At the same time there is a growing movement of 'grinders' or people with less political economic capital engaging with transhumanism (Huberman, 2020). Due to the outspoken desire for changing regulations around technological innovation, an alternative term for transhumanism is **technological human enhancement advocacy** (THEA) (MacFarlane, 2020), a term that emphasises the present formation of transhumanism as a social movement or set of contemporary practices.

Transhumanism: on technology and concepts

Transhumanism is not a single technology with singular implications for methods. Technologies on the transhumanist table include emerging technologies from across computer science, neuroscience, pharmacology, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, biotechnology, robotics, and brain-machine interfaces (More, 2013). Specific technologies raise methods issues in various contexts and some of these are dealt with in other Methods Futures Briefings, including neurotechnology and virtual reality.

The notion of **convergence** indicates that various biological, nano-, information and cognitive sciences will integrate around human enhancement (Roco and Bainbridge, 2002; Bainbridge and Roco, 2006). Transhumanism can be understood as aiming to bring about **posthumans** – beings that come after humans and have greater capacities in terms of healthspan, cognition, and emotion, among others (Bostrom, 2013). This promissory tone is different from much academic posthuman scholarship, which argues that human beings have always been part of different ecologies of entities such that, to warp Latour (1993), 'we have never been human', or that human meanings and beings emerge in complex heterogeneous webs and networks.

The technological **singularity** (Vinge, 2013) is a point at which technological development happens in exponential mode, radically and irreversibly changing human existence. This likely involves the production of superhuman machine intelligence, after which progress accelerates beyond conventional human comprehension.

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Researching transhumanism now

Studies of transhumanism can be found across the social sciences and humanities, including **anthropology** (Huberman, 2020), **education** (Sisman-Ugur and Kurubacak, 2019), **philosophy and ethics** (Sorgner, 2021; More and Vita-More, 2013; Bainbridge, 2013), **science and technology studies**, **sociology** (MacFarlane, 2020), **social theory** (Le Dévédec, 2018), and **tourism studies** (Cohen and Spector, 2020). Several authors comment on methodological concerns.

Many people advocating for transhumanist ideas are extremely wealthy and privileged meaning that **access to elite** participants, particularly their everyday lives, can be problematic (Huberman, 2020). These mean that including elite transhumanists in interviews, participatory research, or surveys. It is comparatively easier to follow transhumanism through media: public materials and spaces like online fora (Huberman, 2020).

It can also be **difficult to physically locate** a philosophy or social movement, and thus conceptual research tools are needed to identify phenomena and practices rather than being bound to people and place (MacFarlane, 2020).

In its quest for posthumans, transhumanism renders human limits as surmountable with technology and knowledge, reducing those limits to technical problems rather than imbuing with a shared meaning of humanity (Ross, 2019). This means that important questions around **identity** are raised – about what it means to be human and how that is shared, or not.

Transhumanism is aspirational with an implicit infinite appetite for improvement. **Reflexive** considerations are called because transhumanism's promissory rhetoric and far-fetched ideas can make it hard to keep hostility at bay, along with a widely critical social science literature (Huberman, 2020). Symmetrically, transhumanist researchers need to attend closely to their own beliefs and assumptions if they are undertaking research themselves.

Research methodology and transhumanism in the future

Speculating on the near future of transhumanism entails a leap of faith in terms of anticipating posthuman capacities and in the likelihood of their realisation. Should transhumanism remain a techno-libertarian advocacy movement, researchers may extrapolate the issues raised in the previous section. However, considering some of transhumanism's possibilities is useful in terms of being prepared for potential emerging issues in social research and sheds light on how researchers think of methodological issues in the present.

Epistemologically, transhumanism is strongly rationalist, with contributions from some critical rationalists, pragmatists and foundationalists (More, 2013: 6). Much transhumanist literature focuses on improvement and innovation across cognition, emotion and health (Bostrom, 2013). Transhumanism may entail a separation of humanity into humans and forms of augmented posthumans. This would raise issues of **power** and **equity** because the statuses and capacities of researcher, participant, and stakeholder communities would change.

Augmented persons' experiences may be sufficiently nuanced, strong and unprecedented that **new forms of harm and suffering** emerge for both augmented individuals and presently configured humans.

Multi-modal and multi-node data production, as well as enhanced capacities for problem-solving, may generate new issues of **privacy**. For instance, through 'real time' health analytics, insurance companies could detect ill health before a potential claimant becomes aware and void claims (Sorgner, 2021). Relatedly, new challenges for **anonymity** may arise particularly where researchers did not possess augmented capacities and participants may be identified via advanced detection, deduction, combination, and interpretation of data, discussions, or publications.

Transhumanist technologies raise matters of concern that include **autonomy**, **individuality**, and **responsibility** because the loci of decision-making and action may be distributed among, or delegated to, technologies. Who, or what, is being researched? **Distributed personhood** – for instance, where physical or virtual avatars interact and experience realities (Bainbridge, 2013) – would generate new questions for experience and phenomenology. What would it mean to research with or alongside an avatar?

As mentioned earlier in this briefing, transhumanism's current form is as a social movement or libertarian philosophy as existence of posthuman capacity. At the same time, transhumanism may also mutate as it continues to respond to critique and the possibilities of emerging technologies.

If you would like to contribute a Methods Futures Briefing to the series, or would like to give feedback, please get in touch by emailing Robert.meckin@manchester.ac.uk.

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