

Generative AI and social science research: Editor's introduction

Methodological Innovations
2026, Vol. 19(3) 135–136
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DOI: 10.1177/20597991261474998
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This special issue brings together research which examines the impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) on social science research. The rise of Generative AI has been met with a mixed response from social science researchers. Some are excited by the new possibilities this innovation might offer, others are alarmed by ethical, epistemological and ecological challenges. Given the gravity of the impact of Generative AI on social science research, we felt it was important to release a special call for articles on this topic. We sought articles which provide critical discussions of the role and implications of Generative AI, as well as articles which demonstrate use cases.

Over the last year, we have seen an increase in articles which address Generative AI. This is a fast-developing field, and perspectives and understandings of this innovation are likely to develop over the coming years. The articles in this special issue relate to a breadth of social science research methods and engage with important ongoing discussions.

In ‘*Does generative AI mean the end for online ethnography?*’ Christine Hine proposes that online ethnography has a future if ethnographers take a more-than-human approach and disrupt assumptions that what occurs in online spaces is a presentation of human behaviour. The release of LLM in 2022 and the explosion of generative AI tools and products that are shaping online spaces is an extension of earlier developments that raised questions about authenticity and human experience for researchers. For example, bots and chatbots have for a long time displaced the human as the sole actor in digital worlds and raised questions about the authenticity of actors who are present in online environments.

A culturally embedded aspect of meaning-making is common in ethnography, with culture not only affecting conclusions, but also shaping what kinds of questions can be asked in that place. In online ethnography, ethnographers require sensitivity to how Generative AI alters the culture of online spaces, affects questions that can be asked and may not represent reality offline. Strategies for ethnographers include adopting reflexive and emic approaches. For example, on the issue of authenticity an ethnographer

might consider it within an online space as another user might, asking whether authenticity emerges as an issue in this context. Ethnographers should be prepared to sit with the ontological ambiguity in online technologies, which can be a tool, a space or way of being. For online ethnography to have a future, we must see it not as humans interacting in digital spaces, but as investigation of a fully digital sociality made up of inseparable relations between human and technology.

In ‘*Automating the Qualitative Interview? Using Gen AI Chatbots in Social Science Research*’ Tullia Jack, Alex Cooper and Lisa Flower argue that chatbots can be valuable tools for qualitative research, but only when used critically. In their study, a sample of social scientists undertook interviews with a Generative AI interviewer, who was designed to pose broad, open-ended questions that are natural and non-leading. The Generative AI interviewer demonstrated both breadth and depth in conducting interviews often following up on responses, and summarising key points for clarification. In follow-up emails many participants noted that they found the Generative AI interviewer to be positive and interesting, although some participants reported feeling annoyed or disengaged. Jack et al. note that the interviewer missed many opportunities to probe responses and ask follow up questions, and may have been leading at times. Overall, the Generative AI interviewer was promising but in need of refinement.

In terms of data analysis, Jack et al. describe the speed and plausibility as superficially exciting. However, they note several concerns, including the hallucination of some research findings which could not be confirmed by the human researchers, the temptation to quickly produce results

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without pausing to reflect, and concerns about the transparency and reproducibility of the results produced. Overall, this article engages with important questions around the use of Generative AI in the production of knowledge, and provides valuable points of reflection for social science researchers using these tools.

In *'Thinking the unthinkable: Generative AI for collaborative, intra-active policy analysis'* Danson Zheng and Ian Hardy consider how analytic capacity in policy analysis is enhanced through collaborative intelligence generated through AI-human collaboration. They argue that epistemic and ethical risks of relying upon AI in qualitative analysis, such as plagiarism or the reproduction of social biases, can be mitigated by repositioning Generative AI as an agentic collaborator. Furthermore, they argue that human-AI collaboration may be more ethical since it challenges and extends human knowledge. To avoid the ethical traps of AI use in qualitative research, humans have a vital role in a human-AI collaboration, including scrutinising sources of information, critical interrogation of representation, and reflexive criticality on the possibilities and limitations of the patterns that emerge. However, Generative AI bots are not just circulators of what is already known. From a post-qualitative position, they are also thinking tools that actively add to or challenge what is knowable by humans.

To illustrate this, Zheng and Hardy take us through an example of a dialogue between a researcher and AI in reference to a common policy analysis framework. They conclude that through intra-action between AI and human, the researcher becomes less passive and constrained by the embedded assumptions in policy, as the AI challenges them to think beyond their initial or surface level interpretations.

In *'The Uses of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Social Research North and South'* Markus Schulz *et al.* emphasise the importance of considering the unequal distribution of technological access in debates about Generative AI to avoid reinforcing social and educational inequalities. They make

use of two unique sources of survey data concerning Generative AI use collected from academics in contrasting countries, Denmark and Mexico. While they describe distinct patterns of Generative AI usage by country, academic status and gender, they observe wide adoption in the social science process in both countries. Schulz *et al.* note a mild optimism that there is, at least, no less Generative AI use reported by Mexican respondents compared to Danish respondents. Schulz *et al.* consider this as an indication that social scientists at one of the global south's top universities are able to keep pace with the Generative AI adoption witnessed in the global north. Schulz *et al.* appeal for continued data collection to provide ongoing assessment of Generative AI use in the global south.

This is a fast-moving area of social science research, which will continue to evolve over the coming years. In the spirit of our journal's aims, we are pleased to bring these articles together in *Methodological Innovations*. We encourage continued submissions which critically address the intersection of Generative AI and Social Science Research.

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