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Two Decades of Reflection and Critique. The Continuous Fear of Replacement—The Renaissance of Feeling and Intuition in the Age of Artificial Intelligence in *Qualitative Sociology Review* (2005–2025)

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Abstract: On the twentieth anniversary of *Qualitative Sociology Review* (QSR), this article offers a critical and autoethnographic reflection on how qualitative sociology has responded to technological innovation over the past two decades. I argue that the recurring fear of replacement, first by online publishing, then by CAQDAS software, and now by Artificial Intelligence (AI), reveals a persistent disciplinary anxiety. Anxiety that qualitative sociologists are being reduced to merely instrumental analytical roles. Drawing on personal recollections as a QSR co-founder and a review of global debates, I demonstrate how these fears have shaped our collective identity. Using the example of precariat research, I highlight the importance of the intellectualization of qualitative research, underscoring how qualitative researchers have become replaceable by technology. While AI now threatens to take over many tasks once considered the province of our expertise, it also highlights what remains uniquely human in our field: resonance, empathy, intuition, and ontological courage. I propose a competency profile for future qualitative sociologists that integrates digital literacy and AI collaboration with a renewed emphasis on embodied and empathetic inquiry. My conclusion presents AI not as the end of qualitative sociology, but as a catalyst for its renewal.

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The Institutional Anxiety: "Some Little Online Newsletter" and the Fight for Academic Legitimacy

When I look back at the early days of *Qualitative Sociology Review* (QSR) in 2005, I recall not only the technical decisions and editorial discussions, but, most of all, the emotional atmosphere surrounding the initiative. These discussions went beyond publishing formats. They were existential struggles over academic legitimacy, identity, and the place of qualitative research in sociology. I especially remember the surprised and sometimes even disgusted faces of some colleagues at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Lodz when I explained that our new journal would appear exclusively online. The skeptical questions were always the same: *How can such a thing be serious? How can an "internet-only" journal keep peer-review standards? Who will archive these files? How do we tell authentic from non-authentic scholarship?* Some critiques were ironic; for instance, when QSR was dismissed, it was described (in Polish) as a *gazetka internetowa* (some little online newsletter), akin to an academic pamphlet pinned to a community board. Other critiques were more formal and bureaucratic. I still remember a senior colleague warning me, *No one will cite you. These are not real publications.*

Now, I see that skepticism stemmed less from publishing technology than from the symbolic authority of paper. Bourdieu (1986) described cultural capital as being tied to institutional forms, such as degrees, titles, and academic journals. Printed volumes carried not only text but also authority. Without paper, the hierarchy was threatened. Online-only publishing was seen as lacking standards. People assumed that a lack of materiality meant weak peer review and archiving. It is ironic. From the start, QSR's peer review was as rigorous as in any scientific journal, maybe even more so, because suspicion made us more attentive. But to others, no print meant no legitimacy. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis is a good fit. The printed journal was the "front stage," a performance that reassured audiences of credibility. Going digital disrupts this performance, leaving readers unsure how to interpret what they have seen.

In retrospect, the rejection of QSR's format was part of a pattern. Each new technology in qualitative research came with anxiety, not excitement. The "little

online newsletter" debate mirrored old fears about tape recorders in the 1950s. Becker (1958) noted that early users of audio technology were accused of losing the "natural" rhythm of notetaking and delegating the ethnographer's ear to a machine. The fear was not only about tools. It was about researcher identity. If note-taking could be replaced by tape, what remained of the ethnographer's craft? If a journal could exist without paper, what remained of editorial authority? For me, the anxiety toward QSR felt personal. I was not merely editing the journal; I was defending a vision of qualitative sociology grounded in openness, accessibility, and methodological experimentation. Choosing an online-only publication was a political act and a stand for open access. It meant that qualitative research could circulate freely rather than being locked behind paywalls. Still, this made us, Krzysztof Konecki, Anna Kacperczyk, and me, "deviant innovators" (Becker 1963). We challenged norms and risked exclusion.

We were not alone. Around the same time, other pioneering journals, such as *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (established in 2000), also adopted online-only models. In North America, *Qualitative Inquiry*, founded in 1995 by Norman Denzin, maintained its print edition while becoming the center for experimental qualitative writing, including autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2000). QSR found its own identity. It was rooted in the Polish interpretive tradition (Znaniecki 1926; Chałasiński 1982), but open to global dialogue. I recall exchanges with invited reviewers from Europe and the US, some of whom were supportive and others somewhat skeptical—*You are brave to go fully digital*. For us, though, it felt like necessity, not bravery. Print costs were too high, and digital distribution offered boundless reach. We sought to provide international readers with easy access to Polish and Central European research. That is the core of sociological dialogue: crossing language, geography, and institution. I vividly remember 2004, in a crowded seminar room at the University of Lodz. We were finalizing QSR's first call for papers. The room buzzed with enthusiasm and anxiety, young and old colleagues alike. One younger colleague whispered, *Are we sure we want to do this?* An older one raised a practical worry: *What if the university library refuses to list us? Without a print ISSN, who will recognize us?* That night as I walked home, I felt both exhilarated and terrified. Exhilarated that we were taking a risk. Terrified because I remembered colleagues' laughter. What if they were right? What if it fails? As a young researcher, backed by my mentor, Krzysztof Konecki, I knew we both faced the risk of being labeled "academic deviants." This mix of fear and hope continued through my career. It returned when I first saw CAQDAS code my interview transcripts. It returned when I asked ChatGPT to generate an analytic memo. Each time, I ask: *What is left of the human researcher when tools take over?*

From 2025, it is almost amusing to recall how radical online publishing once seemed. Today, every major journal has a digital version, and many have become only online. What once felt like a threat to academic quality is now the norm and an international standard. The early fears surrounding QSR never materialized. Peer review is strong, archiving is secure, and digital access has democratized scholarship. Still, these early fears are worth remembering. Every new technology, such as tape recorders, CAQDAS, and AI, brings the same anxiety: the fear of replacement. The issue is not the tool but the qualitative researcher's identity, and the lesson is clear. Resistance to technology often hides uncertainty about our role. The key question is not *Whether technology will degrade research*? but *Who are we as*

qualitative sociologists if machines do our tasks? The "little online newsletter" story foreshadowed current debates on AI. As we once feared online journals would dilute standards, we now fear AI will dilute interpretation. In both cases, the real challenge is not machines, but self-definition.

The First Wave of Instrumentalization (2005-2014): From Narrative to Code

The first decade of QSR took shape through both consolidation and subtle transformation. On the one hand, we sought to strengthen the foundations of qualitative sociology in its classic variations, such as Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer 1969), Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006), and the narrative and biographical traditions deeply rooted in Polish sociology (Znaniecki 1926; Chałasiński 1982). On the other hand, new methodological tools, especially Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), emerged, producing both enthusiasm and unease. Looking back, I see this decade as the **first wave of instrumentalization**, a moment when qualitative researchers began to embrace software as an aid, while simultaneously internalizing its logic, subtly reconfiguring their identity from "interpreters of meaning" to "managers of data."

The arrival of CAQDAS amplified this tendency. I still remember my first encounter with Atlas.ti around 2007. A colleague had demonstrated how quickly one could assign codes to long interview transcripts, retrieve all instances of a code, and visualize co-occurrences. I was impressed by the sheer speed and efficiency, which felt liberating. Gone were the days of coding using paper and pencil, with hundreds of Post-it notes representing codes, ready to be placed on the flipchart to organize them into categories, diagrams, and grounded hypotheses. But I also felt a chill of unease when the software window presented a neat hierarchy of codes, families, and networks. Everything seemed so orderly, so tidy, analytically perfect. Interpretation was reduced to dragging and dropping, to clicking checkboxes. It felt as if the messy, hermeneutic struggle, the dwelling in contradictions, and the silent listening to pauses in an interview were being flattened into digital order. I recall late nights staring at my screen, watching colorful code stripes accumulate on the margins of a transcript. Part of me felt proud of this new efficiency. Another whispered: *Am I becoming a data clerk?* Silver and Lewins (2014) carefully explained the strengths and limitations of software for qualitative research, yet many warned that CAQDAS risked **standardizing the interpretive act**, subtly aligning it with the normative logic of quantitative research (Coffey, Holbrook, and Atkinson 1996; Kelle 1997). The critique was not that software itself was harmful, but that it carried an **epistemic imperative**: to code, to categorize, to segment. As Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss (1998) had already recognized, coding is never neutral. It is always an act of interpretation, but when coding is embedded in software interfaces, it risks being treated as a technical rather than a hermeneutic procedure.

Several dangers followed:

1. **Reification of Categories:** Codes created early in analysis became "sticky," shaping subsequent interpretation. The software favored stability over fluidity, despite the Grounded Theory principle of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

2. **Reduction of Ambiguity:** CAQDAS systems favored discrete codes, discouraging re-

searchers from lingering in ambiguity or paradox. Yet ambiguity is often where the richest insights lie (Denzin 2001).

3. **Managerial Identity:** Researchers increasingly described themselves as "handling" or "organizing" data, adopting the language of management rather than interpretation. This subtle yet significant shift marked the beginning of what I call the **instrumental researcher identity**.

I must confess, however, that part of me welcomed this instrumental turn. As the Executive Editor of QSR in the 10s of the twenty-first century, I was overwhelmed with manuscripts, teaching, and research responsibilities. CAQDAS offered relief because it promised control over the chaos of transcripts. I could search, retrieve, and visualize with astonishing ease. One night, after coding an especially complex set of ethnographic interviews, I printed out a network diagram generated by the software. The nodes and links looked impressive, like a sociological constellation. For a moment, I felt triumphant because the messiness of human life had been transformed into a coherent picture, one that was integrated and comprehensive. But the next morning, as I looked at the diagram with fresh eyes, I felt uneasy, recognizing imposter syndrome in myself. The elegant network seemed to *close off* possibilities rather than open them. It suggested finality, as if interpretation was complete. Yet I knew that the heart of qualitative research lies in the *incompleteness* of interpretation and openness to multiple readings, so I removed the diagram. This minor incident crystallized for me the paradox of CAQDAS. It empowers us but also tempts us to surrender our interpretive agency. These tensions were not unique to Poland or Central Europe. Across the globe, qualitative researchers debated the promise and peril of CAQDAS. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argued that qualitative inquiry was entering a "seventh moment," characterized by new technologies and political struggles over representation. They warned against "methodological fundamentalism," the belief that technical rigor could substitute for interpretive imagination. In the UK, Coffey, Holbrook, and Atkinson (1996) cautioned against the "coding fetishism," emphasizing that codes are tools, not findings. In the US, Riessman (2008) emphasized the narrative integrity of interviews, which cannot be fully captured by fragmenting them into coded segments. In Germany, Kelle (1997) highlighted the risk that CAQDAS would push qualitative research toward a quasi-quantitative paradigm, emphasizing reliability over meaning. These debates echoed in QSR pages, where contributors experimented with CAQDAS and critically reflected on its influence. Some authors praised the ability to manage large datasets; others worried about the "banalization" of qualitative analysis, producing results that were technically precise but conceptually thin. The underlying anxiety of this first wave was the fear that the qualitative sociologist would become a **skilled technician** rather than an **artist of interpretation**. Józef Chałasiński (1982) had already warned decades earlier that, without deep sociological insight, the researcher degenerates into a collector of facts, or "data surgeon," as Krzysztof Konecki (2021) vividly and accurately put it. CAQDAS seemed to heighten the danger that the researcher might become a collector and manager of codes. During one of the methodological consultations, a doctoral student proudly showed me her NVivo project, filled with hundreds of meticulously coded nodes. She asked me, *Is this enough? Have I done the analysis?* I hesitated. The coding was, indeed, impressive. But analysis is not coding; it is the leap from

data to concept, from fragments to meaning. I gave her a metaphorical overview: *You have prepared the ground. Now you must build the house*. That situation captures the essence of the problem that CAQDAS encouraged the illusion that analysis could be completed through technical procedures. However, by doing so, the most critical imaginative, empathetic, and risky work remained. The work that no software could perform.

The Foreshadowing of AI

In hindsight, the CAQDAS debates foreshadow the anxieties we face today regarding AI. In both cases, a new technology offered unprecedented analytic power. In both cases, researchers feared being displaced by the machine. And in both cases, the real danger lay not in the tool itself but in the **researcher's self-reduction**. By uncritically embracing CAQDAS, we risk narrowing our identity to that of analysts, coders, or data surgeons. By fearing AI, we reveal that we have accepted a narrow definition of ourselves. If analysis and coding were our only value, then, indeed, AI threatens to replace us. The lesson of the first wave, then, is that instrumentalization is seductive; it offers order, efficiency, and control, but it also risks stripping us of the very qualities that make qualitative sociology unique, such as empathy, intuition, and ontological courage.

The Second Wave (2015-2025): The Precarity Trap and the Limits of Intellectual Analysis

If the first decade of QSR (2005-2014) was marked by the growing **instrumentalization of analysis** through CAQDAS, the second decade (2015-2025) was defined by an intellectual intensification. Studies on precariousness exemplify that phenomenon (Mrozowicki 2016; Hlatshwayo 2019; Cardone, Tümpel, and Huber 2021; Pilch 2023). In the pages of QSR, authors reflected and contributed to the international rise of research on insecurity, instability, and the fragility of social life. Yet here, too, I detect a paradox. While our analyses became sharper, more theoretically sophisticated, and more critical of power, they often remained confined to **conceptual abstraction**. The embodied, emotional, and intuitive dimensions of human life were present in our data, often painfully so, but they were frequently tamed into categories, discourses, and frameworks. I call this the **precarity trap**: the risk of turning lived experiences of suffering into intellectual artifacts.

The years following the 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing austerity regimes produced a global wave of scholarship on precariousness. Guy Standing's (2011) *The Precariat* popularized the notion of a new class defined by insecurity. Arne Kalleberg (2009) examined the spread of unstable employment and its implications for inequality. Judith Butler (2004; 2009) emphasized vulnerability and precarity as fundamental to human existence, linking them to questions of recognition, ethics, and violence. Meanwhile, Holmes and Marcus (2008) proposed "para-ethnography" to engage with the complex negotiations of risk and uncertainty in global capitalism. QSR was part of this global conversation. Authors examined precarious work, migration, biographical ruptures, and the "trajectories of suffering" (Schütze 1997) produced by systemic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe (Kaźmierska 2014; 2016; Mrozowicki 2016; Dopierała 2019; Nowicka-Franczak 2021), biographical accounts of institutionalization and exclusion (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014), and explorations of coping strategies in the face of structural chaos (Burski et al. 2022; Bieńkowski and Życzyńska-Ciołek 2023). The concept

of biographical work (Strauss 1993) became central to this research when individuals facing poverty, unemployment, illness, or migration engaged in continuous efforts to make sense of their disrupted lives. QSR authors documented how these efforts produced fragile forms of identity, tenuous hope, or, at times, despair. One case that remains vivid in my memory is the story of Natalia, published in QSR (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014). Natalia's life was marked by poverty, parental alcoholism, institutionalization, and the early death of her sister due to medical neglect. Her narrative revealed a profound struggle to maintain dignity amidst systemic indifference. I remember reading Natalia's account. Her words were raw pain. Yet when the article was published, Natalia's voice was inevitably reframed within academic categories such as trajectory, coping, and structural chaos. These categories are valuable, as they enable us to connect individual stories to systemic forces. But I also sensed the absence of immediate resonance, the embodied compassion her words evoked in me. This gap between lived pain and analytic abstraction was not unique to QSR. It was characteristic of much precarious research. Scholars across Europe and North America analyzed discourses of neoliberalism, forms of governmentality (Foucault 2006), and systemic transformations. In Poland, Piotr Sztompka (2021) wrote about the importance of trust and sensitivity in sociology. Yet, in practice, the dominant mode remained intellectual critique. We analyzed, categorized, and theorized, but we rarely allowed ourselves to dwell in empathy, to acknowledge that our knowledge was born not only of concepts but also of resonance, intuition, and feeling.

During this decade, I conducted ethnographic research on street vendors (Marciniak 2016). I spent many mornings and afternoons at urban marketplaces, walking between stalls and talking with vendors whose lives spanned a wide range of fortunes. There were prosperous stallholders, selling imported goods with confidence, and there were older women with trembling hands, offering jars of homemade fruit preserves for a few coins. In their stories, I heard layers of hardship: poverty, petty thefts, illnesses, the weariness of life, and, at times, the sting of being treated harshly by customers. As I listened, their emotions flowed openly: anger, sadness, resignation, and, at times, pride in small victories. I felt their burdens resonate within me; their words and gestures left traces within my body. My instinct was to linger with them, to respond not only as a researcher but as a fellow human being. In those moments, I felt a part of that world, with a sense of belonging, because I had come from the same social class as a child, wandering for hours between the stalls. I felt I was exploring people and places that shaped my identity. But I did not dare to reveal that identity in my analysis and the results. My methodological training reminded me to remain composed, to record, and to ask questions. Later, by coding the interviews, I produced tidy diagrams of processes and categories, as well as maps of phenomena that appeared ordered and clear. But what was most alive in the field: the tremor in a voice, the moist eyes, the heaviness of silence, and my belonging identity, evaporated in abstraction. The analysis captured the structure but not the pulse. Accurate, perhaps, but incomplete. In this, I, too, fell into what I have called the **precarity trap** when translating vivid and painful stories of struggle into abstract categories that conveyed structural truth but lost existential depth. This dissonance deepened my conviction that we need a sociology that makes space not only for categories and diagrams but also for the embodied and emotional vitality of social life.

Marginalization of Embodiment and Intuition

The second wave thus intensified the very tendencies that had begun with CAQDAS: the marginalization of feeling, empathy, and intuition. Three dynamics stand out:

1. **Exclusion of Emotion:** Emotions were often treated as data to be coded rather than as *co-experienced phenomena*. Sociological norms continued to view emotions as subjective, unscientific, or in need of regulation (Grandey 2000). Yet, as Arlie Hochschild (1983) has shown, emotions are central to social life and social processes (Kacperczyk 2016). Ignoring them meant ignoring a vital source of sociological insight.

2. **Suppression of Intuition:** Reflexivity became the watchword (Hałas 2011), but intuition, the pre-analytical grasp of meaning (Woroniecka 2003), was sidelined. Intuition was considered untrustworthy, too personal. Yet some of the most profound sociological insights have arisen from intuitive leaps (Bell and Willmott 2020; Kump 2020).

3. **Lack of Ontological Courage:** Scholars hesitated to step beyond established categories. To theorize precarity, we leaned heavily on Foucault, Bourdieu, or Butler. These are powerful lenses, but we rarely dared to create new ontologies from the ground of lived experience.

Looking back, I see the precarity trap as a mirror of our discipline's identity crisis. By reducing suffering to categories, we maintained intellectual authority, but at the cost of our human responsiveness. We feared being perceived as unscientific if we acknowledged our feelings. We repressed intuition, even though we knew it was often our guide. We avoided ontological risk, preferring the safety of established frameworks. And so, when AI entered the scene in the early 2020s, we were unprepared. For if our value lay only in coding, analyzing, and theorizing within given discourses, then AI could do so faster and more efficiently. We have marginalized capacities such as empathy, intuition, and courage, all of which AI cannot replicate. The second decade of QSR was thus both intellectually rich and existentially precarious. We produced essential analyses of systemic injustice, but often at the cost of silencing the resonance of lived experience. The challenge of the next decade is clear: to move beyond the precarity trap by reclaiming the human capacities we have suppressed. That is where AI, paradoxically, may help. By taking over the instrumental tasks of coding and categorization, AI forces us to confront the limits of intellectual analysis. It challenges us to rediscover the value of feeling, intuition, and ontological courage.

AI as the Ultimate Mirror: The Crisis of the Instrumental Researcher

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not the first technological innovation to unsettle qualitative sociology. We have already faced the tape recorder, the video camera, the word processor, and CAQDAS. Each of these elicited fear, provoked debates about legitimacy, and, ultimately, became normalized. Yet AI is different. Unlike previous tools, which extended human capacities, AI threatens to **replace them outright**. Where the tape recorder captured sound, AI can transcribe, translate, and even summarize. Where CAQDAS organized codes, AI can generate them autonomously, cluster them, and suggest

interpretations. Where word processors corrected grammar, AI now drafts entire analytic memos, literature reviews, or even research articles. That is why I call AI the **ultimate mirror**, as it reflects to us the limitations of the role we have constructed for ourselves. It shows, with stark clarity, how deeply we have internalized the identity of the **instrumental researcher**, a collector, coder, and analyzer of data. If this is all we are, then AI can do it faster, cheaper, and, perhaps, more consistently.

I will never forget the evening I first opened ChatGPT in 2024. With a mix of curiosity and skepticism, I typed a prompt I had often given my graduate students: *Summarize the key principles of grounded theory methodology*. In less than a second, the screen filled with text. To my astonishment, it was accurate, precise, and stylistically polished. It mentioned constant comparison, theoretical sampling, coding, and memo-writing. It cited Glaser and Strauss (1967), Corbin and Strauss (1998), and Charmaz (2006). I felt a wave of conflicting emotions. Relief, because here was a tool that could instantly do what often takes students weeks to master. Anxiety, because if the machine could do this, what would be the need for my lectures? Excitement, because I imagined the possibilities for accelerating learning. And a deep, gnawing fear—*Was my expertise now obsolete?* Later that year, I took it a step further and uploaded anonymized interview excerpts, asking AI to code them. Again, the results were unsettling. It identified themes, grouped patterns, and even suggested analytic memos. Some of its insights were banal, but others were strikingly perceptive, almost indistinguishable from what I might have written myself. I remember staring at the screen in silence, the room around me dark. A thought crystallized—*This is the "little online newsletter" moment all over again, but magnified*.

The truth revealed by AI is uncomfortable. For decades, we sought to legitimize qualitative sociology by emphasizing its **analytical rigor**. We adopted systematic procedures, coding, categorization, and discourse analysis, to demonstrate that we were not merely "storytellers" but "scientists." In doing so, we distanced ourselves from the messy, embodied, emotional, and intuitive dimensions of inquiry. This strategy worked, up to a point. It secured legitimacy, funding, and publication. But it also led us into a trap. By defining our value primarily in terms of intellectual procedures, we created a role that machines can now perform.

AI exposes this reductionism with brutal clarity. It is an **analytical machine par excellence**. It can:

- Transcribe and translate with near-perfect accuracy.
- Generate codes, clusters, and categories across massive datasets.
- Summarize and synthesize literature from thousands of sources.
- Produce draft analytic memos and even article sections with stylistic fluency.

If this is what we believe makes us valuable, then the fear of replacement is justified. The **instrumental trap** has been vindicated. Unsurprisingly, the emergence of AI has provoked fear and resistance in our community. In editorial discussions, I have heard colleagues insist that AI cannot possibly replicate the subtlety of human interpretation. Others dismiss it as a fad, a gimmick that will soon fade. Some universities have even banned its use, fram-

ing it as a threat to academic integrity. These reactions remind me of the debates in the early 2000s about online publishing. Then, too, people insisted that "real" journals required a print format. Then, too, they feared that legitimacy would collapse. Moreover, the fears proved misplaced. What we are seeing now is a form of **disavowal**: a refusal to acknowledge that AI can perform many of the tasks we once considered ours uniquely. This disavowal protects our identity as analysts but only temporarily. Reality will not be denied for long.

Beyond the Instrumental: Rediscovering the Human

Paradoxically, AI may be the most significant development for qualitative sociology in decades. By threatening to replace our analytical procedures, it forces us to confront what cannot be replaced. It holds up a mirror and asks, *Who are you, really, if the codes and categories can be generated without you?* The answer lies in what I call the **renaissance of human uniqueness**. AI cannot feel empathy, cannot resonate with an interviewee's trembling hands, or perceive the heaviness in a silent pause. It cannot take ontological risks, generating concepts that transcend the existing knowledge on which it is trained. It cannot intuit, imagine, or create in the radical sense of leaping beyond the given. That is where the future of qualitative sociology lies: not in rejecting AI, but in embracing it as a partner for instrumental tasks, while reclaiming our irreducibly human competencies.

After my initial shock with ChatGPT, I began experimenting with it more systematically. I asked it to generate summaries of long transcripts, to draft literature reviews, and to propose coding schemes. One day, I assigned it a task that, given the analyses it had previously performed, seemed trivial in light of ChatGPT's capabilities. I asked it to generate a bibliography for a previously uploaded article, including in-text citations. And I felt a mix of relief and unease. This time, the relief came from a different source, not so much from the convenience of working with AI as from the errors it made. A seemingly reliable algorithm that generated codes, categories, hypotheses, and extensive descriptions in seconds proved unreliable. The simple task of compiling a bibliography ended in complete failure, as ChatGPT generated fictitious publications, distorted titles, and erroneous dates. After all, it makes mistakes. *It makes mistakes! It fails! We are safe and irreplaceable*—I thought with relief.

After relief came doubt. What if it is just a matter of time and algorithm refinement? I have discovered that AI lacks morality; it is not ashamed of its mistakes; it does not take responsibility for false information; it does not think critically or probabilistically; and it fails to consider the consequences of its unreliability. But does this not shed light on instrumental, unfeeling analysis, which, in its most extreme form, produces knowledge through categorization, abstract theorizing, and purely intellectual reasoning? AI is, thus, more than a methodological tool. It is an existential challenge to our discipline. It reveals the consequences of decades of self-reduction to the role of instrumental analysts. It forces us to decide whether to cling to that identity—and risk obsolescence—or to embrace a new one, grounded in resonance, intuition, and ontological courage. The challenge is not technological but ontological. The question is not *What can AI do?* but *What does it mean to be a qualitative researcher in the age of AI?*

The Renaissance of Uniqueness: Reclaiming Feeling, Intuition, and Ontological Courage

AI does not simply pose a methodological challenge; it calls for an epistemological reorientation. If AI can now perform the instrumental and analytical tasks we once considered our core expertise, then our survival as qualitative sociologists depends on embracing what machines cannot replicate. I call this the **renaissance of uniqueness**, the deliberate reclaiming of feeling, intuition, and ontological courage as the indispensable qualities of human inquiry.

The first step in this renaissance is counterintuitive but necessary. We must consciously **delegate the instrumental to the algorithm**. That means not resisting AI in transcription, coding, or preliminary analysis, but rather fully embracing it as a collaborative tool in these domains.

- **Systematic Analysis:** AI can perform the mechanical dimensions of coding—segmenting data, identifying patterns, and comparing categories. That aligns with the logic of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006) but frees the human researcher from repetitive labor.

- **Descriptive Synthesis:** AI can generate clean summaries, draft literature reviews, and propose analytic memos. While imperfect, these outputs are often sufficient as starting points.

- **Technical Labor:** including translation, anonymization, and formatting. All tasks that consume our time without requiring interpretive depth are better handled by AI.

Far from diminishing our role, this delegation liberates us. It allows us to redirect our energy toward the **irreducibly human** dimensions of inquiry.

The first of these dimensions is **resonance**. Hartmut Rosa (2019) argued that modernity is characterized by acceleration, which produces alienation; the antidote, however, is resonance, a responsive, "vibrating" relationship with the world. For qualitative sociology, resonance is not a poetic metaphor but a methodological principle. When we sit with an interviewee, share silence, and notice trembling hands or sudden tears, we are engaging in a form of embodied knowledge that cannot be captured in text alone. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) described the body as our primary way of being-in-the-world: perception and knowledge are always embodied. Drew Leder (1990) elaborated on how the lived body functions as an instrument of knowing, particularly in moments of suffering. These insights compel us to reframe qualitative research not as the extraction of information, but as a practice of resonance through empathy. Empathy has long been viewed with suspicion in sociology, dismissed as "unscientific." Yet Arlie Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labor and Candace Clark's (1997) studies of sympathy norms show that emotions are structured, cultural, and sociologically significant. To ignore them is to ignore a vital dimension of social life. Reclaiming empathy means legitimizing it as a source of insight. It means acknowledging that our feelings during fieldwork are not contaminations of the data, but rather part of the data, part of the interpretive process. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) advocated for autoethnography: the researcher's emotions, vulnerabilities, and experiences are not distractions but windows into social life.

The second indispensable quality is **intuition**. In philosophy, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) described *Vorverständnis* (pre-understanding) as the horizon that enables interpretation. Alfred Schutz (1976) emphasized typifications and stocks of knowledge that precede explicit analysis. These insights remind us that interpretation always begins in intuition: a pre-analytical sense of meaning, a hunch, a felt resonance. In my research, intuition often presents itself as a bodily sense—a discomfort with a category, a sudden recognition of a pattern, or a phrase that echoes long after the interview. I have learned to trust these moments, to record them in memos, to return to them as potential seeds of theory. Yet academic training often discourages such trust. Students are taught to bracket their intuitions until they can be justified through systematic coding. But intuition is not opposed to rigor—it is the spark that guides rigorous inquiry. Without it, analysis risks becoming sterile.

The third quality is **ontological courage**: the willingness to move beyond established frameworks and create new concepts. Pierre Bourdieu (1990) warned against scholastic reason, the tendency to endlessly refine existing theories without taking risks on new ones. Goffman (1967), in contrast, dared to invent his dramaturgical ontology, forever reshaping sociology. Ontological courage means daring to theorize from the ground up, to risk concepts that may be fragile, contested, or unconventional. AI cannot do this. By design, it works with what already exists, synthesizing from past data. It cannot leap beyond the archive into the new. Only human researchers, through intuition and courage, can take that step.

Several scholars have already pointed the way toward such a renaissance. Norman Denzin (2001) called for a "performative" turn in qualitative research, emphasizing evocative representation. Sarah Pink (2015) developed sensory ethnography, foregrounding the concepts of embodiment and perception. Hartmut Rosa (2019) articulated resonance as an ethical and methodological principle. In Poland, Krzysztof Konecki (2018) advocated for contemplative sociology, integrating mindfulness and presence into the inquiry process. These approaches share a commitment to reclaiming the **researcher's full humanity**. They remind us that sociology is not only about intellectual analysis but also about lived, embodied, and emotional engagement with the social world.

Competency Profile of the Future Researcher

The renaissance of uniqueness can be summarized in a competency profile for the qualitative sociologist of the future:

Table 1. Competency profile

Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes
Theoretical traditions	Building rapport and trust	Empathy and compassion
Digital literacy, including AI tools	Facilitating dialogue and resonance	Ontological courage
Ethics of data, consent, and AI use	Conceptual creativity and theorizing beyond existing categories	Comfort with ambiguity and uncertainty
Embodied epistemologies	Reflexive use of intuition in analysis	Commitment to resonance as a value

Source: Self-elaboration.

Each category requires elaboration:

- **Knowledge:** Beyond classical traditions, researchers must now master digital and AI literacies, while also engaging with phenomenology and the concept of embodiment.

- **Skills:** The art of rapport, dialogue, and resonance becomes central. Analysis remains, but as a creative and interpretive act rather than a technical procedure.

- **Attitudes:** Empathy, courage, and comfort with ambiguity are not optional; they are the core.

Ultimately, the renaissance of uniqueness points toward what I envision as a **sociology of resonance**. That is a sociology that fully embraces AI for its instrumental capacities but insists that the essence of qualitative research lies in human resonance, our capacity to feel, intuit, and courageously reimagine social life.

Such a sociology would:

- Legitimize embodied, emotional, and intuitive knowledge.

- Value risk-taking in conceptualization over safe reproduction of theory.

- Treat empathy not as bias but as a method.

- Recognize the researcher not as a data technician but as a resonant interpreter of the human condition.

In this vision, AI is not a threat but a catalyst: by taking over what can be mechanized, it compels us to reclaim what cannot.

Conclusion

Anniversaries invite both celebration and reflection. On the twentieth anniversary of *Qualitative Sociology Review*, I find myself returning not only to the journal's milestones but also to the trajectory of qualitative sociology as a discipline. QSR's story is, in many ways, the story of our collective anxieties: the suspicion toward online publishing in 2005, the ambivalence about CAQDAS in the 2010s, the intellectualization of suffering in the mid-2010s and 2020s, and now, the fear of AI in the mid-2020s. At each stage, the pattern has been the same. Technological or methodological novelty is usually greeted with skepticism, often framed as a threat to legitimacy or identity. The community resists, sometimes ridiculing, sometimes ignoring, sometimes prohibiting. Over time, the novelty becomes normalized, even indispensable. And the researcher's identity quietly shifts, often in directions we had not anticipated.

The first fear, that online-only publishing would destroy legitimacy, has long since vanished. The so-called "little online newsletter" (which, in fact, is an online publishing) became the standard for all major academic papers. Today, no one questions the seriousness of digital journals. In fact, the printed version now seems antiquated, a symbol of exclusivity rather than authority. Looking back, it is striking how much energy was spent defending paper when the actual value of scholarship lay in dialogue, openness, and accessibility. QSR contributed to this transformation, not only by demonstrat-

ing that online publishing could be rigorous but also by showing that a Polish-based journal could reach a global audience. We became a meeting place where Central European traditions intersected with international ones, where memoirism and symbolic interactionism converged with narrative inquiry, grounded theory, and autoethnography.

The second fear, that CAQDAS would replace interpretation, proved more complex. CAQDAS did not replace us, but it did change us. It encouraged managerial identity, a focus on coding and categorization, and a sense that analysis could be standardized. It contributed to what I have called the **instrumental trap**, the subtle reduction of the qualitative researcher to a skilled technician. At one point, this identity appeared to be a step forward. It provided legitimacy, structure, and the appearance of rigor, but it also narrowed our sense of what qualitative sociology could be. It marginalized feelings, empathy, and intuition, which means qualities that were harder to code, quantify, and justify within the norms of academic publishing.

The third fear, that of confronting suffering too directly, emerged during the precarity turn. We produced profound analyses of systemic transformation, precarious work, and biographical disruption. However, these analyses often remain confined to conceptual abstraction. They captured discourses but not resonance, categories but not trembling hands. That, too, was a form of self-protection. To dwell in empathy is painful. To acknowledge intuition is risky. To propose new ontologies is precarious. And so, we intellectualized suffering, convincing ourselves that this was enough. But the result was a sociology that was at times brilliant, yet curiously bloodless.

The fourth fear, that of AI, confronts us now with unprecedented intensity. Unlike earlier tools, AI can not only provide technical support but also perform intellectual labor, such as summarizing, coding, synthesizing, and drafting. In doing so, it exposes the limits of the instrumental identity we have built. If our value lies only in analysis and description, then we, indeed, risk obsolescence. But AI also offers us a chance to rediscover what we had neglected. By delegating the instrumental to the algorithm, we are forced to reclaim what cannot be delegated: resonance, empathy, intuition, and ontological courage. In this sense, AI is both our most significant threat and our greatest gift. It is a mirror that reflects our reductionism and a threshold that invites us to step into a new era.

As I envision the QSR industry twenty years from now, in 2045, I see a journal that is transformed yet remains continuous. I envision articles co-authored with AI, where algorithms handle data synthesis while humans provide context, resonance, and interpretation. I envision special issues on "remote empathy" as a method, on contemplative sociology and multiverse experiences, and on the phenomenology of AI-human relationships. I imagine that submissions will be judged not by the sophistication of their coding schemes but by the courage of their conceptual risk, the depth of their resonance, the clarity of their ethical commitment. In this imagined future, QSR will remain what it has always aspired to be: a home for interpretive sociology. However, interpretation will no longer be defined solely by technical rigor. It will be defined by the human qualities that AI cannot replicate.

The twentieth anniversary of *Qualitative Sociology Review* is not only a celebration of what we have

achieved. It is a threshold. Behind us lie two decades of resistance, adaptation, and growth. Before us lies an uncertain yet promising future in which AI and human resonance must coexist. If we accept the challenge, we may discover that AI is not the end of qualitative sociology but its renewal. By liberating us from the instrumental trap, AI can catalyze the renaissance of uniqueness, a qualitative sociology grounded in empathy, intuition, and ontological courage. This, I believe, is our task for the next twenty years. And if we embrace it, then in 2045, when QSR celebrates its fortieth anniversary, we will not be lamenting our obsolescence. We will be celebrating our rediscovered humanity.

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