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Post-qualitative inquiry in outdoor studies: A radical (non-)methodology

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Abstract

In this chapter we borrow from St. Pierre (2014) to tell a brief and personal history of engagements with research from our undergraduate studies to our present doctoral research and beyond, drawing on each other's narratives to think 'through' various paradigms/turns of thought. Sandwiched in-between the introduction and the conclusion, we generate a brief conversation between us (the authors), relevant scholars and you (the new author), to example an(other) stimulating development in academic research/thinking. It is a creative endeavour as we attempt to generate a style of writing/thinking that is reminiscent of research currently being labelled as post-qualitative inquiry.

Introduction

We feel Elizabeth St. Pierre introduces post-qualitative inquiry best when she reminisces:

Looking back now, I know that I read Deleuze so early in my doctoral program that the ontology of humanist qualitative methodology could never make sense. For me and others like me, that methodology was ruined from the start, though we didn't quite know it at the time. (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 3)

With this statement, St. Pierre demonstrates the manner in which institutionalized methodology has neglected what theory can do. A recent and controversial addition to academic methodological practice, post-qualitative inquiry diffracts dominant qualitative methodologies to produce different paths to the habitually trodden ones in academia (St. Pierre, Jackson, & Mazzei, 2016). In this type of research, each researcher will undoubtedly create their own '*remix, mash-up, assemblage, a becoming* of inquiry that is not *a priori*, inevitable, necessary, stable, or repeatable but is, rather, created spontaneously in the middle

of the task at hand' (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 620, original emphasis). St. Pierre (2011) believes that

this has always been the case but that researchers have been trained to believe in and thus are constrained by the pre-given concepts/categories of the invented but normalized structure of "qualitative methodology", its "designs" and "methods", that are as positivist as they are interpretive, often more so. (p. 620)

Post-qualitative inquiry seeks to destabilise this representational trend of knowledge *re*-production.

Emerging novel post-qualitative (non-)methodologies¹ challenge the researcher to produce knowledge differently by "refusing a closed system for fixed meaning" in order to "keep meaning on the move" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. i). These fixed meanings could involve 'mechanistic coding', which St. Pierre (2011, p. 622) infers "is a positivist social science of the 1920's and 1930's", or "reducing data to themes", which Jackson and Mazzei (2012) suggest "do little to critique the complexities of social life" as "such simplistic approaches preclude dense and multi-layered treatment of data" (p. i). Put another way, "to convert what we owe to the world into 'data' that we have extracted from it is to expunge knowing from being" (Ingold, 2013, p. 5).

In the translator's foreword to Deleuze and Guattari (2004), Brian Massumi pointed out:

The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body? (xv-xvi)

What does it 'do'?

In this chapter we provide examples from our own inquiries, demonstrating how thinking with a post-qualitative itinerary attempts to tease research – ethics, ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies – out of the Enlightenment agenda and profoundly transform them to create new opportunities for learning. Specifically, we describe our post-

qualitative inquiries in outdoor environmental education and therapeutic landscapes (Clarke and Mcphie, 2016; Mcphie, 2017). We recount how our (non-)methodological approaches to these areas changed the very nature of the realities we thought we were inquiring into, and what this, in turn, made (im)possible² for us as practitioner-researchers. We describe thinking with post-qualitative insights for performing creative research and illustrate how our research data were presented and analysed towards new conceptions of research in outdoor studies ‘after method’ (Law, 2004).

We urge researchers in outdoor studies not to fall ‘paradigms behind’ (Patton, 2008, p. 269) by avoiding the temptation, common in mainstream qualitative research methods, to separate *thinking and theory* from *research practices* (Guttorm, Hohti, & Paakkari, 2015; Jackson and Mazzei, 2012). We recommend a post-qualitative agenda as a positive discrimination to challenge the (un)comfortable binaries of research. Research itself becomes another theory to deconstruct and think *with*, hopefully to create new epistemological pathways to further social and environmental equity.

The following discussion is deliberately conversational in style to disrupt the subject-object distancing that a more formal academic writing style adopts. We do this to witness its performance on the page and see how this might transfer to your own interpretation of the text. Simultaneously, we deliberately alienate you from a positivistic representational academic text to remind you that this is not *the truth*. We talk with each other, but also draw the work of other authors into the conversation, taking their original quotes ‘out of context’ to create yet another context – another (non-)methodology.

A discussion

Jamie: Dave, this is how I came to post-qualitative inquiry...created spontaneously in the middle of my co-operative action research (see Heron & Reason, 2001). I hadn’t ‘planned’ it beforehand; I hadn’t prepared it. I simply couldn’t find a suitable method of ‘analysis’ – that didn’t adhere to some kind of mythical epistemological ‘truth’ – until ‘it’ came to me as I came to it simultaneously. Vanessa, what was *your* intention?

Vanessa: There is no use asking me what I intended with this text: this text wrote itself into being, so my relationship with it is the same as that of a reader – what it did to me will be different from what it does to you (de Oliveira Andreotti, 2016, p. 80).

Jamie: Well, I can tell you that I was unsatisfied with suggestions of coding and theming in qualitative methodologies – they created too many boundaries and hierarchies. It seemed too superficial. I was also beginning to wonder about what makes *primary* empirical evidence supposedly more ‘reliable’ or ‘trustworthy’ than *secondary* empirical evidence. It seemed to be ‘made-up’ to fit a particular patriarchal/hierarchical agenda. I found a quote – or perhaps, the quote found me, I can’t quite remember. Elizabeth, would you remind us please?

Elizabeth: [T]here is no primary empirical depth we must defer to in post analyses as there is in the ontology and empiricism of conventional humanist qualitative methodology. That is, in post ontologies it makes no sense to privilege language spoken and heard “face-to-face” as if it has some primary empirical purity or value, as if it’s the origin of science (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 12).

Jamie: Thanks. Dave, I can’t tell you how relieved I was by this quote. St. Pierre (2011) suggested qualitative inquiry was born out of a positivistic paradigm, and as such had failed to escape it at the ontological level. Yes, of course! I had always felt uncomfortable with prescriptive methodologies. Justifying my discomfort with quantitative research designs was easy (see Parsons, 2003). I found a little solace in qualitative designs, especially more creative approaches, yet there was still a lingering knot preventing a free-flow of movement between myself and traditional academic research practices.

Both *validity* and *credibility* are judged against a set of rules and voices that came into use from middle French *validité* (Harper, 2016a) and from the medieval Latin *credibilitas* (Harper, 2016b). By assuming that research is credible, we are also assuming that the ideals of the institutional paradigm are set or fixed and true. Patti Lather (1993) chose to problematize validity “in order to both circulate and break with the signs that code it” as well as wrestle with “all the baggage that it carries plus, in a doubled-movement, what it means to

rupture validity as a regime of truth” (Lather, 1993, p. 674). In a similar vein, Maggie Maclure (2015) problematized “critique in qualitative inquiry”. Maggie, could you elucidate?

Maggie: [It] assumes that the world is demarcated or divided into asymmetrically-valued categories: authentic and inauthentic, true and false, good and bad, and aspires to negate one side in the interests of a greater moral authority, or a smarter take on what’s really going on (p. 5).

Jamie: The invented concept ‘rigour’ – used to judge the merits, worth and trustworthiness of modern research – is always embedded in the historicization of hierarchical knowledge production. It presupposes a strict disciplinary ‘adherence to the truth’ (Allende, 2012) a way of perceiving the world that became deeply entrenched from the Italian Renaissance through to the Enlightenment to legislate an ethical, ontological and epistemological stranglehold on the Western world.

Jorge: Rigor is also being methodical commitment [sic] to experimental procedure, to the need of controlling all parameters that can affect the results of our tests [...] it is to disrobe ourselves of our prejudices and enthusiasm when we interpret our results. (Allende, 2012, paras. 5-6)

Jamie: But Jorge, procedures, inaccuracies, controls, parameters and preciseness are always already prejudiced due to their Occidental framing that subjugates other ways of knowing and being. So, one of the co-emerging purposes of my PhD thesis became an attempt to “produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (Lather, 2013, p. 653; St. Pierre, 1997, p. 175). This process allowed me to deconstruct prevailing conceptualizations of outdoor therapies (as ‘natural’ landscapes influencing peoples’ mental health and wellbeing) and instead create new concepts to describe/explore the implications of an immanent ontology on conceptualizations of mental health and environments – as metaphysically and ethically inseparable. For example, I found no reason why a city centre couldn’t be identified as being driven insane (Mcphie, 2018).

Dave: Another example for outdoor studies is Reinertsen (2014), who takes up a post-qualitative approach to explore an outdoor education project being used by a high school in Norway to draw assessment and learning closer together. Reinertsen (2014) develops a playful (non)methodology where words are seen as bodies with material effects and in which she performs “research as deep mappings and/or diffractive readings as spatial or topographical fractural analysis of other objects emerging” (Reinertsen, 2014, p.1023). This research produces a novel and affecting language to help complexify the topics of study: teachers’ experience, assessment, outdoor education, etc. Here, research creates interference patterns through thinking *with* data and the theories of Dewey/Derrida/Deleuze. Ultimately this research invents new concepts of researcher/outdoor education/assessment and keeps the research problems on the move in a novel manner.

Jamie: I used *thinking with* as well: my reading of theory happened alongside my reading of data until a gradual multidirectional co-production emerged. For example, I recorded some of my co-participants/co-researchers comments (just as they did with other data) that were always already informed by literature, embodied memory, etc. In turn, the comments inspired an expedition of inquiry *that took me* along a particular path of investigation, constantly informed by myriad influences, such as phrases from websites that I simply couldn’t let go of due to their shocking inequitable impact.³ I was on a ride that I was not in control of – and I liked it that way. The inquiry took me for a walk.

Maggie: [We] are obliged to acknowledge that data have their ways of making themselves intelligible to us [...] On those occasions, agency feels distributed and undecidable, as if we have chosen something that has chosen us [...] In a previous article, I described that kind of encounter in terms of the data beginning to ‘**glow**’ (MacLure, 2013, pp. 660-661, **glow** added).

Jamie: Maggie, the initial comments I heard in Liverpool glowed a little too, a sort of *blush*, enough for me to feel the need to record them. The focus group meetings post visit (re)enforced the glowing of particular data, encouraging them to *bloom*. Looking back at the photos, the videos, the journals, my notes, also (re)enforced the *blossoming* of certain paths/

events. Discussions and readings all merged to inform what I initially thought were ‘my’ choices. When I think back to how I could possibly justify what *type* of inquiry this was in terms of what influenced what (theory=practice) or how ‘I’ might have ‘chosen’ a particular route to take the study, the closest I can get to an answer is that it was like participating in/with a murmuration of starlings. Of course, neither came *first* as they were never transcendently bounded in *clock time* in the first place. This is how the assemblages of my thesis were written. Each assemblage was co-produced by multiple ‘things’ – events, processes, materials – coming together from multiple directions, rhythms and temporalities. Intention didn’t seem to ‘begin’ *in* me. It was always relational, multi-agential, topological and ‘intra-active’ (Barad, 2007). I really don’t think I had much of a choice in the matter. I came to conceptualize ‘environ(mental) health’ (as co-produced) and this was a major outcome of my inquiry – transforming the manner in which those in outdoor studies can think about therapeutic practices.

One of the most striking things that happened during my inquiry was what the inquiry itself did – how it performed. I always knew that it was futile to attempt to take the ‘I’ out of the research but I never really thought about taking the research out of the research. For example, after a year of post-qualitative co-operative action research on mental health and wellbeing, all of the co-participants/co-researchers reported becoming ‘healthier’. The research process became a therapeutic tool. *Doing* the research itself – the regular outings, the ‘data’ collection, the social interactions, the focus group meetings, the group analyses, the debates, the writing, the reading, the thinking, etc. – seemed to co-produce contextualized effects that I could not separate from what it was I intended for the inquiry to ‘find out’. I realized that I could never again simply ‘do’ research without the research itself doing something back. Anyway, I passed!

Dave: Well done! Post-qualitative research is sometimes described as thinking how to reach the new, and how to reach the new can’t be described, as it hasn’t yet arrived (Massumi, 2010). This is obviously problematic for someone wondering ‘how to do it’! So, rather than discussing procedure, I’ll start with the ‘why’, or the ethics, of post-qualitative research and how this is linked with thinking. Firstly, methodology is philosophy at its foundation (excuse this turn to depths!). That is why when students are asked to write their methodology sections

they are often asked to talk about ontology and epistemology. The emergence of post-qualitative research is a consequence of how these philosophical concepts are understood in contemporary thought, but it also drives these debates. Beginning to understand post-qualitative research therefore involves lots of reading. When we were students of Adventure Education in the early 2000s, Jamie, I remember us both reading Allison and Pomeroy (2000). The authors critique the dominant positivist approach to research in experiential education in the 1990s. They argued that researchers needed to shift their philosophical assumptions from positivism to an approach based within a constructivist paradigm to allow access to the processes of experiential learning. That paper changed entirely the way I *think* about research and importantly it taught me that *my thinking about methodology could change radically*. Of course, since then my thinking has again changed, but it is papers, like that one, that affect you at certain points in your life, that are hugely ethically important, because altering the way you think the world *is* also creates what methodology is possible for you. Reading is one of the processes of this learning, *but so is enacting research*. Methodology is pedagogy; it teaches as we perform it. I am not concerned here with the obvious fact that it teaches you about the research question you are attempting to answer or your subject of study, rather enacting research teaches the researcher about the very possibilities of being; how could focusing on ontology and epistemology so directly (and the manner in which they seep into every consideration of our practice) *not* do this? What happens is a sort of research↔learning, where the learning is metaphysical. Perhaps this is why your participants became ‘healthier’, Jamie? Research creates worlds in its process. All methods do this, yet not to the same ends. For instance, in post-qualitative research this research↔learning is *posthuman* – that is, it realizes that the enlightenment human subject might be nothing more than an idea, and that this idea has had (some catastrophic) world changing effects. This understanding is important for ethical living/research in the face of injustice, climate collapse and mass extinction. It sanctions attempts to articulate other ways of thinking/creating the world. It wants to create research that implies other worlds. Consider, for example, this understanding of ethics from Deleuze:

Gilles: In an ethics, it is completely different [to morality], you do not judge. [...] *you relate the thing or the statement to the mode of existence that it implies, that it envelops in itself.*

How must it be in order to say that? Which manner of Being does this imply? (Deleuze, 1980, np, my emphasis)

Dave: Now, when I read or write, I try to ask myself what mode of existence the writing implies. I try to background what a paper is *saying*, and instead focus on what a paper *does*: what subjectivities does it create? What worlds are implied? What is the research↔learning for me, and the reader? To spot what modes of Being a piece of research implies it is useful to have some concepts to *think with*. According to Deleuze and Guattari, concepts are tools to put to work in the world. For example, when we used their concepts of the *rhizome* and *becoming* in our examination of the Scottish education policy *Learning for Sustainability* (Clarke and Mcphie, 2016) it allowed us to connect our thinking in ways that humanistic qualitative inquiry obstructed. We thought *with* theory and the policy to dislodge the stable notions of indoors and outdoors, learning, place, and the learner as inferred by the policy. We asked what mode of existence the policy implied and, thinking with the rhizome and becoming, we saw that the policy could imply other modes of existence. And so, we interpreted (read ‘created’) it differently: communication in learning events became expressive rather than seen as the transfer of information; the learners/teachers became co-constitutive events or processes (haecceities) rather than individual enlightenment subjects; and we were able to destabilize the prevailing distinction of places as locatable, delineated, geographical sites instead to envision places becoming, as paths of learning. It is important to recognize that this interrogation was not a critique as is generally understood in academic terms, as a putting down or judgement of the *Learning for Sustainability* policy. Rather, it was what MacLure (2015) calls an immanent critique; designed not to shut thought down, but to be productive. This, I think, is more seismic than it might sound. The entire nature of academic critique changes in post-qualitative research, and I want to talk a little about that now.

Gerrad, Rudolph and Sriprakash (2017) raise several points of (traditional) critique against post-qualitative inquiry. They suggest that, in what they see as its complexity and difficulty, it can fail to acknowledge the exclusionary boundaries it creates. They are concerned about the potential ‘mystification’ of the research process and suggest the focus on the ‘new’ can reinforce settler colonialism in research practices. In thinking about these

points, I could follow a rational logic to agree with or critique these critiques, and this is tempting, but, in recognition of an immanent critique as the mode of thought of post-qualitative research, I instead wonder at the potential for research to open-up the concerns that Gerrad, Rudolph and Sriprakash (2017) describe; to riff off them. Or to acknowledge that even they, critiques, are immanently affective within post-qualitative research; they imply modes of existence, they do things. Post-qualitative research doesn't attempt to operate from a perspective of critical objectivity, but rather acknowledges the situated, partial, ethical, relational, posthuman and responsive ways of knowing that have been developed in feminist studies. It is non-oppositional. In this way post-qualitative research might not best be described as an approach, but as a series of understandings linking with other understandings, even critiques, in the pursuit of ethical research. Personally, I feel I am learning about post-qualitative research all the time. It always feels like an attempt, or something that informs my thinking about research. For now, I think that philosophical concepts garnered from reading *are* methods, but, at the same time, are tools that allow possibilities for living (Taguchi & St Pierre, 2017). In post-qualitative inquiry philosophy is the coal face of practice; it expands the realm of the possible, and acknowledges that research creates worlds (Law, 2004).

Conclusion

Post-qualitative inquiry is now gaining ground in qualitative research handbooks and journals (Honan & Bright, 2016; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2011; St. Pierre, Jackson & Mazzei, 2016). However, Greene “expresses concerns: first, about whether post-qualitative research can still be considered research; second, where it is going; and third, what is being lost in the new inquiry” (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, p. 632). Greene (2013) imagines post-qualitative inquiry “as a kind of retreat *into the mind*” (p. 753, emphasis added). We think the *Cartesian ghost* still haunts Greene’s (2013) onto-epistemological position as she perceives post-qualitative inquiries as challenging her *mind*, but not engaging her *body* (p. 754). But *thinking with* post-qualitative inquiry, for example, upends this understanding, removing the mind-body dualism and highlighting Spinoza’s point of the mind as an idea of the body (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012). Therefore, we would inflect Greene’s stance with an affirmation that post-qualitative inquiries are more like transgressive

and ethico-political advances out of *the non-physical mind* and into a physical world other than merely human.

If we cease to privilege knowing over being; if we refuse positivist and phenomenological assumptions about the nature of lived experience and the world; if we give up representational and binary logics; if we see language, the human, and the material not as separate entities mixed together but as completely imbricated “on the surface”– if we do all that and the “more” it will open up – will qualitative inquiry as we know it be possible? Perhaps not. (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, pp. 629-630)

The dominant paradigms that have forced their hand in the world of academia need an overhaul to find better stories than the current one being traced repeatedly, as we attempt to “produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 175). This becomes an ethical imperative of what we *can do*.

Notes

1. Ken Gale (2018) refers to ‘*methodogenesis*’ in which “conceptualisation and inventive research process is given precedence over the fixities of set methodological representation and signification” (p. 44). So, (non-)methodological approaches attempt to co-produce a more fluid “enactive understanding” (Massumi, 2015, p. 94) of the world – knowledge ‘making’. This is not an anti-methodology, as we see the importance of inquiry and analysis of inquiry methods. So, the ‘non’ is bracketed to denote a particular problematizing of many methodological approaches and understandings, often born out of patriarchal, logocentric and Euclidean onto-epistemologies.
2. The bracketing (im) denotes that either or both statements are possible.
3. Liverpool ONE website: The company who built Liverpool ONE, Grosvenor, proposed *eliminating* ‘anti-social elements such as vagrants and beggars’ from their privately owned public space.

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