

Post-qualitative inquiry: Four balancing acts in crafting alternative stories to live by

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BIO:

Pauliina Rautio, (PhD, Adjunct Professor) is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Oulu, Finland. She is the Principal investigator of AniMate, a research project of child-animal relations. Pauliina's research interests have always included human-environment relations in everyday life contexts. Currently her research sits at the crossroads of human-animal studies and childhood studies, inspired by everyday life aesthetics. She is especially interested in conceptualising co-habitation with birds. All of these interests call for non-conventional methodological approaches.

Abstract

Post-qualitative inquiry can be seen to challenge – not fix – at least four elements of what Elizabeth St.Pierre calls conventional humanist qualitative inquiry: the nature of data, the role of methods, the quest for increasing clarity, and the idea of an individual “voice”. In conducting post-qualitative research rather than offering replacements for these or completely renouncing them I outline four key balancing acts. Unless understood as continuous acts of balancing, post-qualitative inquiry runs a risk of being identified as yet another isolated fortress of righteousness.

Post-qualitative denotes a shift in the way social scientific research is envisaged and undertaken. It is a phase in the constant negotiation and continuum of what counts as academic or scientific knowledge. A phase that takes its form both from and against what preceded it. Post-qualitative is to be understood in the way Thomas Popkewitz urges educational research to question schooling: through historicizing (Popkewitz, 2015). That is, interrogating for instance why certain (methodological) structures exist, and not others, and asking “How did we get here?”.

In spite of this linear rhetoric of shifts and continuums, in my view post-qualitative approaches have not, however, replaced the more conventional qualitative, let alone quantitative approaches. They have instead carved a space, by now an established one, in the midst of a diversity of still existing other approaches. Thus post-qualitative to me, as an approach to doing research, is largely about developing an attitude and the ability to co-exist with – ideally also to collaborate with – as well as to question the diversity of existing understandings: of research, of knowledge, of the world.

In educational research, post-qualitative approaches emerged from identification of alarming trends in existing mainstream research (mainly in the Anglo-American context): namely the repositivisation of educational sciences (Lather, 2006) as evidence-based science (StPierre, 2006) in the face of increasing demand for accountability (MacLure, 2006). Where qualitative inquiry had once been the underdog to challenge quantitative methodologies, it had now begun to resemble it, seeking perhaps justification through the “logics” of positivism. The methods of coding and categorizing, for one, aiming at systematic and cumulative knowledge production can all be taken as indicative of an objectivist epistemology and a realist ontology.

Summing up seminal texts on post-qualitative inquiry (e.g., StPierre 2011; Koro-Ljungberg 2016; Ulmer 2017), post-qualitative can be seen to challenge – not fix – four elements of what Elizabeth St.Pierre calls conventional humanist qualitative inquiry. These are: the nature of data, the role of methods, the quest for increasing clarity, and the idea of an individual “voice”. Rather than offering replacements for these four

elements or completely renouncing them, I take the challenge posed to be that of balancing when poked. In conducting post-qualitative research I myself work with four key balancing acts which I will outline next.

The first balancing act: data

With data, the balancing act has to do with planning. When data – or the materials selected to be worked with – is planned and understood as a neatly lined set beforehand, there is little room for surprises, for the not known, for questions we could not have anticipated. I understand post-qualitative data as participation in the world through the materials on offer, *with both* systematic and planned as well as surprising and serendipitous designs. The collection of materials to be called data are identified towards the end of the inquiry, not prior to it. What counts as data is not a question of “anything goes”, or a result of complete lack of pre-planning, however. The collections – things, beings, texts, habits, discourses, numbers, affects, scents – that end up being data are the combinations that actually contributed to the phenomenon under study: what did you happen to think with, and how did it help you to produce insights? You might have gone through countless other material or human encounters during your study, some planned, some not, but never ended up thinking with them. The materials that did turn into data can only be known afterwards.

The second balancing act: methods

The role of methods is a balancing act between the objective and the subjective in your study. Methods are often endowed with authority of their own, as if they were objective tools with manuals for correct using. The classic example from undergraduate research seminars is that you have a toolbox of methods available and your task is to choose the tool that fits the work you’re doing. After you’re done, you return the tool and someone else can pick it up for similar usage. This mechanistic understanding is selling short the expertise of the scholar as an intellectual, reducing her actions to selection when in fact methods could be thought of as dynamic thinking patterns or skills for generative, rather than descriptive interacting with the world. When taken at face value, however, nobody asks who invented the tools in the first place, and whether different kinds of tools – also ones yet to be invented – could make the work at hand easier or more insightful, or altogether different! This is especially evident when we think about methods for analysis of data. Analysis of research materials is a process of theory-based thinking, aided by methods but not replaced by them.

The third balancing act: clarity

Third, the quest for increasing clarity is a balancing act between being able to say something, or speak for something, and highlighting the complexity and entanglement of every thing and being in the world. The more stubborn the focus on representation as something, the less space there is for the not-yet-known, the emerging, the wild, the uncategorizable. Take your basic thematic interview: when the participating person is lying, imitating, or just fooling around in their responses, what have we learnt to do with the analysis? Clean away the parts where the transcript doesn't make sense or fit into our pre-planned themes. Focus on the expressions that are coherent and make sense. So that we are able to say something. On the other hand an extensive mapping of all kinds of inferences and influences, of entanglements and diffractions, and running after loose ends and inconsistencies can be as fruitless if what is produced is an endless wallowing swamp. Karen Barad's (2007) notion of an "agential cut" could be understood as an "activist cut" – the framing of neverending emergence and fluidity, momentarily, with an explicit motivation for change and transformation. The clarity in inquiry could reside in the end product or the political implications and practical insights, rather than in the methodological design – albeit these go hand in hand somewhat.

The fourth balancing act: voice

The last balancing act is that between individuality and de-individualisation. Conventionally the idea of qualitative inquiry has been to fish out, with appropriate methods, authentic "voices" of individual people to be able to then represent their point of view, their identity, and their as if "true self". This individualistic view does not fare well with the theoretical base of post-qualitative inquiry, according to which there are no completely individual ideas or identities, let alone voices. That everything and everyone exists as implicated and entangled, as of the world and not external from it. The by now established notion to unravel this stance is the idea of intra-action as opposed to interaction, also by Karen Barad (2007). Where interaction posits two separate individuals taking turns to act, intra-action posits as if no existing individuals prior to the moment of their engagement. However, in spite of the rhetoric of everything blurring and bleeding, there is always separation and distance, there is always the self and the other – however porous, leaky and intermingling these entities are. Erin Manning (2007), for one, warns us against a "fusional fantasy" and

points out that communication requires separation and a respect for alterity (the other). Jaques Derrida (2005) terms this as “the unbridgeable abyss” (191) and warns against the idea of immediate access to the other, leading at worst to a blind re-appropriation of the alterity of the other (Dougherty, 2011, 82). The fourth balancing act thus has to do with retaining the idea of entangledness and mutual implication and at the same time respecting the necessary alterity of the other.

Post-qualitative inquiry, unless understood as these continuous acts of balancing, runs a risk of being identified as yet another isolated fortress of righteousness. This is evident in Eva Petersen’s (2018) critique of new materialism – and in sweeping also posthumanism and post-qualitative approaches. Petersen identifies a sense of othering present in what I posit as post-scholarship. She claims that the scholars vowing for materialist onto-ethico-epistemologies do so categorically and hierarchically. She claims that others, with perhaps a more humanist or phenomenological orientation are othered in this process. Having laid out post-qualitative as a phase in a linear continuum in the beginning of this section, for argument’s sake, I continue to stress – and respond to Petersen’s critique – that in my view post-qualitative approaches have not replaced the more conventional approaches but instead established alternative ways of knowing. To me, the acquisition of methodological space by post scholarship is less a question of foothold in a competition over somehow “right” representations, rather a question of increasing the richness of the ways in which researchers can claim things and do things with and through research – also in collaboration with others.

The importance of this richness created by post-qualitative approach in general and in my own research in particular locates in aligning with, for one, Donna Haraway’s (2016) popular appeal to pay attention to the stories we create – or to the matters with which stories are crafted – because they matter as horizons for the future. The mapping of relations and intersectional entanglements, also beyond the viewpoint and political interests of human individuals, provides us a basis for alternative stories (texts as well as embodied practices, and all in between). Rather than entirely speculative fiction, alternative stories to live by are thus grounded in knowledge of what and who constitute and make evolve the existing stories we live by, and whether crafting of new stories might bring needed transformations in the world. In my own research I am currently interrogating stories, texts, discourses and practices labeled as ‘social’, particularly in children’s daily lives

and in relation to the more-than-human individuals who share their communities. I ask what the social is that gets assembled before our eyes; who and what, in fact, (can / do) take part?

The balancing act most challenging to me, in the way I conduct post-qualitative inquiry, is the balance between endless accounting of relations and connections (because it is so intriguing) and the ability to make a clear argument for some kind of impact. My anxiety over potentially producing merely self-indulgent descriptions of the world resonates with Petersen's (2018) critique and the response to it by Peter Kraftl (2018). Kraftl duly agrees with the perhaps over emphasis on questions of data and the researcher's experiences, in post-scholarship. Kraftl suggests that while a focus on the bodily experiences (often of the female researcher) carry a valid political history of contesting the neglect of embodiment in the patriarchal academy, the move forward to "what next?" should be sketched:

[...] the double-bind that requires further consideration is the extent to which a focus upon the *praxis of the research-er* (as a recognisable human subject) is a necessary step along the way to *research praxes* that better resonate with the more radical underpinnings of new materialism. (Kraftl, 2018, 32)

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