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Collective, Vulnerable, Nascent (Post) Qualitative Inquiry-Writing

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Abstract

As a group of multidisciplinary postgraduate research students and teachers emerging as a “we,” we read, discussed, and then, without planning to do so, responded in writing to the textual provocations of three post qualitative texts. We picture ourselves as a “classing,” a “becoming class” (Meirieu, 2020, para. 1.). We are a study-group-thinking-writing experimentation; vulnerable, wobbling and joyously grappling to (re)shape (our) post qualitative inquiries. The experiment offered a scholarly place to critically, creatively, and softly curate post qualitative questions and wonderings. The writings below offer a lure into our nascent post-qualitative vulnerabilities. The purpose of this paper is to offer an exploration of what it means “to do” post qualitative research. This includes both feeling-out what post qualitative research “is” and understanding that there is no extant single powerful definition and that post qualitative writing is likewise without set generic rules. In this paper we experiment with both the definitional boundaries of post qualitative research and the conventions of how to understand and come to write it. This paper is an incipient materialisation from a pedagogical event.

Keywords

post-inquiry, post qualitative, research students, postgraduate

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Collective, Vulnerable, Nascent (Post) Qualitative Inquiry- Writing

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As a group of multidisciplinary postgraduate research students and teachers emerging as a “we,” we read, discussed, and then, without planning to do so, responded in writing to the textual provocations of three post qualitative texts. We picture ourselves as a “classing,” a “becoming class” (Meirieu, 2020, para. 1.). We are a study-group-thinking-writing experimentation; vulnerable, wobbling and joyously grappling to (re)shape (our) post qualitative inquiries. The experiment offered a scholarly place to critically, creatively, and softly curate post qualitative questions and wonderings. The writings below offer a lure into our nascent post-qualitative vulnerabilities. The purpose of this paper is to offer an exploration of what it means “to do” post qualitative research. This includes both feeling-out what post qualitative research “is” and understanding that there is no extant single powerful definition and that post qualitative writing is likewise without set generic rules. In this paper we experiment with both the definitional boundaries of post qualitative research and the conventions of how to understand and come to write it. This paper is an incipient materialisation from a pedagogical event.

Keywords: post-inquiry, post qualitative, research students, postgraduate

The Weaving Wayfarer

Drains drip.

The cold night air

flows between wooden tables.

Sharing knowings and unknowings.

We are a class of multidisciplinary postgraduate Education Research Methodology students and teachers who read and work together on three texts connected to post qualitative inquiry. The three texts were “A Brief and Personal History of Post Qualitative Research: Toward ‘Post Inquiry’” by Elizabeth St. Pierre (2014), “Editorial: Postqualitative Curations and Creations” by Nordstrom and Ulmer (2017), and David Rousell’s (2019) paper, “Inhuman Forms of Life: On Art as a Problem for Post-Qualitative Research.” During one evening class, where our senses were registering the intensities of the cold air, an emerging “we” responds to reading, thinking, talking and worrying about post inquiry and post qualitative research (as scholarly activities; nurturing our response abilities (see Haraway, 2016; Higgins, 2017).

Our teachers (Manathunga and Heimans, two of the co-authors of this paper) had Brian Massumi's essay, "Collective Expression: A Radical Pragmatics" in mind, although they did not follow his procedures strictly when putting a minor concept into play using the "conceptual speed dating technique" (Massumi, 2015); nevertheless, the experiment was similarly generative. We were given three articles and we had one week to read and think about them. To extract softly within/against the boundaries of time, space, and concepts, we engaged with the texts in various ways prior to our next Tuesday night Education Research Methodology class. When we arrived at class the following week we moved outdoors. It was raining and cold outside, which immediately jolted our dogmatic way of "doing" class – we had a "radical" new classroom (Hein, 2017). While outside, we were allocated half an hour to individually write a response to the three texts we had read. With time as the coercive control, we immediately questioned how we could respond so quickly or whether we should. We were not aware of this task prior to arriving to class. It was *still* raining and cold. Once we had finished writing our responses, our class was split up into small groups and our teachers invited us to share our written responses within the small group. A lot of discussion resulted concerning ontology, epistemology, reflexivity, and what qualitative and post qualitative research means. Of course, on the night we did not come to any clear conclusions or definitions, and this mirrors the current state of the post qualitative field. "*Post qualitative inquiry never is. It has no substance, no essence, no existence, no presence, no stability, no structure*" and 'for that reason, there can be no post qualitative 'research design' or 'research process'" (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 9). One way to describe what our class did might be an endeavour to work post qualitatively – activating an experimental event as a minor methodological inquiry with an "affirmative attitude of trust in the world and [the] experiment[s]" (ibid, p. 10). In the context of our Education Research Methodology course, we call this post qualitative experiment "minor" because the "major" methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods and so on) dominate the course program. Post qualitative inquiry is allocated only one week out of thirteen. Therefore, the pedagogical purpose of this experimental, minor class work (Manning, 2016) was to collectively engage with our research(er)-ing tensions to shift what we know, desire and value about ontology, epistemology and the constructs and binaries of research methodological practices.

Perhaps the best a teacher can do is get out of students' way and help them refuse this or that necessity. They will "do" and "think" something, and if that doesn't work, they will "do" and "think" some-thing else. That's the nature of post qualitative inquiry. (St. Pierre, 2019, pp. 12-13)

Our work in this paper is to set in motion the first step towards activating a collective response to the three texts we engaged with, and that we have now materialised, as our reflexive individual "I" struggle to collect themselves. Our responses were not assessable components of the course; however, our teachers decided to collect them that night. As the experiment unfolded (unplanned) towards the texts, our teachers and the class then worked together to craft this article as an example of what collective, vulnerable, nascent (post) qualitative inquiry-writing might "be." We pulled our responses together and share them below. We do not see our written responses as the end, but rather a knot forming into and out of meshworks (an ontological alternative to networks) – a meshworking of multi-disciplinary lifelines emerging and entangling (Ingold, 2007). Perhaps we do not have to BE finished or BE conclusive, yet. Instead, we invite our dilemmas into the infinite game of being scholarly (Harré et al., 2017) to explore tangents and felt responses, the problems of language, love, hope, and the paradox of being human and desiring the posts. Each piece is a product of our individual postgraduate student thinking of that time and we have tried to leave the thinking as it "is" while also

attempting to craft writing that pays attention to the emerging possibilities of postqualitative inquiries (St. Pierre, 2014, 2019).

Below are our seven extracts of writing from that experimental night; our written knots woven together in no particular order or author, yet unified by one dissected poetic response (Ingold, 2007). The poetic response was created by one of the teachers who quietly observed each group's conversation, paying attention to objects, the "more-than," people, as well as all of her senses (Murriss, 2021). She hadn't originally planned poetry, but a poetic response emerged as she jotted down keywords and key noticing and thought about how to (re)present them. The extracts invite you into our individual research(er) paradigms to experiment with our post-qualitative inquiries and vulnerabilities as an extension of the "next" experiment: this paper. Our writing wonderings are largely unedited and fragile, and we welcome the dissonance.

*Reading in bed
at kitchen tables
on the bus
at the desk.
Falling asleep.
Brains exploding.
We question everything.
It's exciting, enjoyable.
We wave the text around.*

Response One: Therefore, I/We Wonder...

Research wants to understand, to know the unknown. There are many ways to come to knowledge and many more perceptions on the inherent "truth" of the knowledge generated. The thought of engaging with creativity in qualitative research is very meaningful as it offers a chance of openness for truly new ways of thinking, and with that the critical review of existing and accepted theories, ontologies, and methods: openness and vulnerability as a path of learning and creation. How can we be creative when we are being kept in the forms of ontology and methodology? Traditional science is strictly regulated by theories and methods which the new scholar is required to study and adapt to shape their own inquiries. How much can it be their own if it is largely based on fundamentals others have established? The notion of going back and forth resonates with me as I like to think of the research process as the natural evolving of a topic, an idea, to a research inquiry. So, I/we wonder, is post qualitative inquiry a new avenue of approaching research or is it simply an utterly honest, self-reflexive, and truly transparent approach of undertaking and presenting research? Going one step further, is it post rather than pre? Is that what research was "before?" Exploration and experimentation based on creativity and the search for knowing the unknown.

*Feeling out of our depth.
Ignorant, changed.
Looking up terms
exploding the dots.
Rhizomes form
connecting to horticultural husbands.*

Response Two: (De)Constructing the Linear with Dots

- Unconscious epistemology (subconscious).
- Nothing is stagnant.
- Ontology must be organic.
- Deconstruct the “beginning.” The beginning is not the beginning. It is the present. In order to find the beginning, go back. Deconstruct the ontology.
- Humanist/positivist ontology is driving the “current posts.”
- Current demands driven by globalisation and neoliberal influences in schools have encouraged and “allowed” this “fake post” faux critical research.
- The very foundations on which post critical research is based (i.e., ontology) are based on assumptions steeped in and invented by a discrete cohort of males.

*Powerful effects
emancipated from assumptions
from linearity,
from colonisation,
from White Male ways of knowing.*

Response Three: Struggling Towards a Turn

Can St. Pierre’s written text talk to me? How can the written work shift my thoughts, make me feel so happy, comfortable, and secure, yet unsure, vulnerable, and confused? As I think for answers, frameworks, structure, and linear processes, I find myself accepting the “alternative” messy shifts turning my desires on their head. Maybe it’s the “messy-turn” driven by my ontology. Despite resisting elements, I am flourishing. I can see what can be and it makes sense. It invigorates and excites me, because despite my vulnerable state, I know that my epistemological and ontological positions (can I even use that word) might send my research presentation alternatively. The work might shift not only me, but others. What an empowering motive.

*Hands moving.
Epistemologies constantly evolving.
We sit at wooden tables,
rain drops splash beyond
the roof.*

*We are at peace, now.
With our early researcher
positionings.*

*We see our openness
our vulnerability
as invigorating, empowering,
creative.*

Response Four: Movement and Turns

There is an interesting interplay between the ontological turn within the social sciences towards post qualitative research and neoliberalism’s effect on higher education. There is a

breaking down of old binaries, a proliferation of “a thousand tiny methodologies” (Rousell 2019, p. 2). Through using post qualitative methods, academics have been emancipated and empowered by new ways of creating, legitimising, and presenting research. This trend is something which I have noticed within my academic career, though it does predate me. When discussing this with others, there are different views on this motivation, a testament to the post qualitative turn itself. However, there is a decidedly personal motivation to post qualitative research, something St. Pierre (2014) recounts in her own work. What this means to me is that the “I” of being “objective” within social science research can be dropped. Standpoint theory and knowing what our history is and how that has affected our research design is important. However, the post qualitative turn appears to be more than just recognition of personal history but utilising it to further research. I have found that post qualitative methodologies and methods can inspire. Other people I have talked to, who have recently been exposed to the post qualitative, have designed new research projects and redesigned their existing doctoral research projects. This is not to say that traditional qualitative methods do not hold this same inspiring quality; more that there is a freedom inherent within post qualitative approaches. I feel that this inspiration comes from two areas: the fore fronting of questions about “the human” in research and the freedom of escaping traditionally imposed limitations. The post qualitative movement has the potential to be emancipatory for researchers and allow for research that would otherwise not be considered valid. I see the issues that post qualitative research could face would be around how splintered it could become.

*Self-styling methodologies.
Umbrellas of post qualitative
give shelter
to new vulnerable thought.*

*Research becomes
a lovely messy space.
Problematizing.
The only structure
sitting with concepts
choosing our own adventures.*

Response Five: Experiment-*ing* and Feeling the Affects

Moving to the discussion of the reading by St Pierre, we located ourselves around a table some distance from the lecture room. I was cold and feeling a little nervous. As is usual for me, I remained quiet as I listened to the others discuss their thoughts. They mostly found it a difficult read, as they expressed that it didn’t seem to flow as they were used to reading. Some spoke of getting bogged down by citations that were from authors with whom they were unfamiliar. When I felt comfortable to add my comments I did so with surprising confidence. I realized during the discussions that I was very comfortable with challenging the status quo. By contrast, the other members of the group were somewhat bemused by this paper, finding that it contradicted their understandings of the research model they were already developing. When putting forward my ideas I did not feel the cold of the night; however, whilst listening I was aware that I shivered slightly. I also noticed that our teacher was observing our discussions and I was curious. I was again aware of the cold. I spoke about my understanding of the St Pierre paper and listened to the other interpretations of the other papers – we saw similar ideas. We both noticed it was cold and remarked accordingly. I was oblivious to the other groups

nearby. I enjoyed the interaction and the opportunity to discuss the ideas presented in the papers, although I was pleased to return to the lecture room as it was warmer than outside.

*The close air of the
classroom.*

*The fluoro lights
glare from the roof.*

*Hands wave.
Papers shuffle
between drink bottles
coffee cups, computers,
paper.*

*Feeling illiterate
we look up Google.
We go beyond
our usual thinking.*

Response Six: Soft(ly) Fun

The journey of learning about methodology has been both surprising and exciting for me and I have been able to get in touch with a deeply philosophical part of myself that is both fun and curious. Sitting with not knowing is a comfortable place for me and being soft in my perspective has become more and more important. When I say soft, I mean lightly wanting to connect, gently and humbly. What stood out for me were the concepts – ecological, relational, knowing – and how these linked my thinking to the concepts of intersubjectivity, Indigenous methodology, and post qualitative and post critical thinking. In the chaos we can see connection, and not at the same time. We are a paradox of paradoxes and completely unknowing, yet knowing it all, as we let ourselves go and recognise our special state among all things. Rousell argues that art is a conduit of exploration, not a path to solutions. Art is “untethered from human intentionality,” and if can go beyond our “hylomorphic schema,” our inhumanity becomes ecologically connected (Rousell, 2019, p. 887).

*Fluid ideas
Non- human.
In human.
Beyond human.*

*We doodle our ideas
A woman meditating.
The snake represents the
inhuman world.*

*Drawings help our thinking
Feeling
Introspective
Ideas of immanence.
Buddhist philosophy
Poetry, art.*

*The dance of nature***Response Seven: Infinite Games? Freedom Within the Chaos**

This week's readings (the one I read, the others for the jigsaw, and the ones I skimmed) excited me. It seemed to be a call to action; an invitation if you like. It resonated with the parts of me (or is it the whole of me?) which feel(s) at home in a women's circle, medicine drums sounding, and women holding the space for each other. These processes and spaces, these meeting of minds and hearts, feel familiar to the other incarnations of me, yet, this week in this class, in this institution...I felt that I could also try in my way to be free. It's interesting to remember this institution: the bricks and mortar, the landscaped gardens and walkways, the roads carved into the earth like gashes in the skin of the bleeding earth. I know, partly, or at least I think I know, that this is related to why our teachers have taken us outside. They disentangled us from the setting of academia – “the decapitated head,” ripped from its body, its context, and to an extent, its influences. But not tonight. Tonight, I sit outside. Cheeks, head uncovered, hands and parts of my feet exposed to the cool night air, I've been holding Braidotti (2013, 2019). I've been waiting, afraid to take her on. She scrambles my precisely arranged thoughts irreversibly and irrevocably – and suspends me forever below the lofty heights of reason. Reason and protocol, procedures and expectations exist above the chaos...or is it below? Is it that they exist below the higher art of expansive thinking, in the bowels of creativity, as it were?

Were my thoughts “arranged,” and if so, how? An assemblage, they were not. I'm not convinced assemblage is what Deleuze and Guattari meant by “agencement,” in fact. *Oui. En fait*, I think they had the French meaning of “agencement” in mind instead: the idea of arrangement or layout. To my mind, assemblage infers a clicking and clacking together of machine parts; click clack, now the cogs can turn, and the machine awakes. No. To “flatten” must also mean to allow those ideas to rest. Rest where? “Laid out,” of course. To be just what they are, what they have been and what they always will be. To exist where they have always existed somehow. Beginning before they began, singing before they were sung. A landscape veined with luscious streams that wax and wane as needed. A resource for the thirsty mind. A quenching. Or a lessening to make way for a stream, or the beginnings of a forest to grow with a single shoot. Or indeed a reservoir of little ideas that grow as they are reeled in, firmly, determinedly – on the line of any who may fish there, or indeed any who have even the eyes to see.

Conclusion; An Invitation for Further Thought

Much like post qualitative thinking, the more-than elements of this lived/living experimental experience were irrepresentable; the chilling cold weather, the dripping rain, the sounds of thought, the glances we made looking up to the sky prior to the pen flowing on the paper; however, our affective experiences and embodied ways of coming to know post qualitative thinking were collectively valued and actualised. The experience revealed that creative and experimental scholarship is/can be inclusive, rigorous, and joyful. Through this creative process of reading, thinking, struggling with ideas, evocatively writing, and then connecting with this reading-writing-event, we are reminded that “the university is a place of possibilities” (Harré et al., 2017, p. 9). We were engaged in the infinite game of academe (Harré et al., 2017), which is designed to invite more and more people into the game and to keep the game going for all eternity. This is not a game of winning and losing, but of including and grappling, keeping ideas flowing, bouncing, and growing between people, and between people and the more-than-human (the rain, the wind, the drink bottles and coffee cups).

Resonating, lively, joyful conversations that ebb and flow like the tides, washing us alive with the wonder of thought. In a landscape of prescribed methodological “choice,” these curated responses may insinuate a “seed of radical change” has been planted (Aberasturi-Apraiz et al., 2020, p. 2). They may allow for a kind of radical hope to flourish in the university (Manathunga and Bottrell, 2019). As Manathunga and Bottrell (2019) suggest, this radical form of hope is both personal and collective and is characterised, as Barcan (2013, p. 148 & 169) outlines, by “openness, possibility and generosity”; by enabling us to “name social problems” and “permit disagreement” or dissensus. It is the kind of hope displayed by the Great First Nations Crow Indian Chief, Plenty Coups, when seeking to prepare his people for a life after colonisation, for “hope in the face of an abyss where no one can really know what survival means” (Lear, 2006, p. 96). As Williams and Gable (1989, p. 118) argue, “to be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing.”

Some post qualitative inquiries will grow, spiral, clutch and thrive, and others will not. Nevertheless, housed in between the interruptions, we invited infinite research possibilities that defy metricised value, but are valuable.

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