"Do the next thing": an interview with Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre on post-qualitative methodology

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Professor Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre's work focuses on critical and poststructural theories of language and the subject and what she has called post qualitative inquiry or post inquiry. She asks what might come after conventional humanist qualitative research methodology. She's especially interested in the new empiricisms/new materialisms as well as new research practices enabled by the ontological turn.

During St. Pierre's visit to the Finnish Educational Research Association (FERA) Conference in Oulu in November 2014, we had the opportunity to talk with her about post qualitative research around some questions we had sent her beforehand. We then transcribed, edited, and translated the interview, and published it in the Finnish journal *Kasvatus* (Education) in spring 2015. In this interview St. Pierre talks in the US context, where qualitative methodology is turning—or being pushed to turn—back to positivism with normalized and formalized practices, St. Pierre encourages researchers to constantly question the prevailing truths and the traditions they have learnt too well.

> *In Post qualitative research* (St.Pierre, 2011)*, you write about the challenge of finding new language to speak with that is not grounded in the subject of humanism. In your chapter on undoing the subject you write that when the description of the subject changes, everything else changes well* (St.Pierre, 2004, p. 293)*. Where or how should we begin in science? Could we forget the individually name researcher?*

One of the things that happen when you begin to read poststructural theories and especially when you begin to study ontology (e.g., the new materialisms/new empiricisms) is that the old words don't work anymore because so many are grounded in the subject of humanism. And in science, so many are grounded in epistemology with hardly a nod to ontology. Those humanist words embed you in a particular discursive and material structure. Derrida wrote that when you use a concept you bring with it the entire structure in which it is thinkable. So if you use the word "individual," you situate yourself in a human-centered structure. If you think the "researcher begins a study," then you think the researcher exists before the study, ahead of language and materiality, that the researcher is not always already in the middle of everything, in the middle of many different studies that have already begun that she might continue. If you ask the question "what is…", you ask an ontological question about identity, not

difference. As you read and read, you begin to understand what language does and how it exists, and you have to find different language. What is particularly helpful in Deleuze and Guatttari's work is that they have given us lots of new concepts that are not embedded in humanist epistemologies and ontologies.

So I ask my students what they are already doing that they're interested in thinking more about, in reading about, in studying. In effect, they've already begun. The first thing I want them to do is read, read, read and then "do" the next thing that makes sense and to keep doing the next things and then all that doing is a *methodology*—that is, if they still must cling to the idea of methodology.

  How do you teach research then?

I recommend that students read several books that provide an introduction to qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods methodologies—those seem to be the three major categories of empirical methodology in the U.S. today— so they know how they are described. We don't teach much historical or philosophical research, unfortunately.

But I don't want them to get stuck in any of those methodologies—in the norms of any of those. I don't want them to take too many methodology courses because then they begin to think it's *real.* I do tell them they need to read a lot of "theory" because they need to have different ways of thinking about whatever they're interested in thinking about. We're thinking with some theory whether we can identify it or not, and it's usually the dominant, normalized discourse—neoliberalism, for example—which is racist, sexist, classist, and so on. So before students begin thinking about methodology I want them to study epistemology and ontology. From that reading, they'll figure out how to inquire without falling back into some pre-existing methodology that mostly ignores epistemology and ontology.

As for qualitative methodology, what I think has happened over the years is that we've taken every little tiny thing in qualitative methodology and elaborated and expanded it so we could publish the next journal article or book. We must have hundred of articles on interviewing— it's insane. I think we've created a monster. Qualitative methodology was invented in the 1970s and 1980s as a critique of positivist social science, but we've structured, formalized, and normalized it so that most studies look the same. The "process" is the same: identify a research question, design a study, interview, observe, analyze data, and write it up. We can just drop a researcher down into that pre-given process and they know what to do, and we can pretty much predict what will come out. In this way, qualitative methodology has become predictive, like positivist social science.

So I don't want my students to be "trained" in any methodology. One thing that has become very clear to me recently is how hard it is to escape our theoretical/methodological training. If we can't think outside what we studied 20 years ago as doctoral students, how can we keep moving, keep thinking, keep inquiring? I think the mark of excellent scholarship is changing our minds and being willing to do that. I tell my students how precarious our work should be, that we should understand that the next article or book we read might very well upend everything we believe and that that is mark of "rigorous" scholarship. Patti Lather said something about the value of "rigorous confusion," and I really like that.

As for the problem with our training, it's interesting that when I talk with qualitative faculty who've been researchers for decades—what some have called "soft" social scientists—when I really push them to explain how they decide whether research is scientific—they usually say it has to be *systematic.* That's what they fall back on, *systematicity* is the final determinant. But that doesn't make sense to me

because if you talk with expert "hard" natural scientists—biologists, chemists, physicists, award-winning scientists—they'll often say their insights, their really creative work, is outside systematicity, that the insight came during a conversation, during their morning run, or something like that. Systematicity can certainly be valuable in our work, but it won't save us—it can't guarantee rigorous, high-quality science. I think social scientists too often try to mimic a simulacrum of the hard sciences—a real that never existed. They think the hard sciences are systematic, so they, as soft scientists who want to be taken seriously, rely on systematicity, which can actually shut us down, keep us in the "systematicity rut."

But the social sciences, especially in the U.S., are quite positivist. Psychology, a field that continues to be very influential in the U.S., is positivist, and some of the first educational research in the U.S. was done by psychologists, so that kind of thinking dominates much educational research. Economics, the hardest of the soft social sciences, is positivist. Political science is positivist. Positivist social science basically rejects metaphysics and tries to mimic the natural sciences. So there we are. We are so concerned with being rigorous, systematic, scientific—with the prestige of hard science—that we force ourselves into these narrow methodologies that almost prevent us from doing something different. (The worship of "science" is called *scientism*.) It's taken me a long time to really understand that.

I think much of this new work is trying to connect educational research and practice back to philosophy and the natural sciences, where it has always existed, and to de-center its relation to the social sciences, which, I think, has overwhelmed us and normalized what we think and do. I love working with students who have degrees in philosophy—they have the conceptual frameworks to think with. They don't have to rely on the methodologies we teach to get them going.

Do you see here a connection with collaborative work? Could it be used as a method for destabilizing our individualized researcher subjectivities or decentering the cogito?

I don't especially promote collaboration as it's generally defined. I think collaboration has been highly romanticized. In the history of writing pedagogy, for example, it appeared in the 1970s and 1980s when writers took up social construction, and I've written about how constructionism changed the way we teach writing (Wyatt et al., 2014) and encouraged writing groups, writing process, peer review, and so on. I do encourage my students to organize writing groups, because they're inexperienced writers and need readers. But I think I'm always collaborating with authors living and dead when I read and write. I can't think without Foucault, and Spivak, and Derrida, and Butler and Deleuze, and many others, so all my work then is a collaboration whether I'm actually co-authoring a paper with another living *individual* or not (St.Pierre, 2014).

Collaboration is one of those concepts based on the humanist subject that doesn't work any more. It assumes there are separate individuals who decide to work together. If we think we do not have a separate existence, if we think we are not individuals separate from other people and everything else, then the word *collaboration* doesn't make sense. If we believe we exist in assemblage, in entanglement, in haecceity, then collaboration doesn't make sense. That's one of those words that brings an entire ontology along with it.

I don't like to write with other people. I say I like to write too much to share! I do like to read with other people though, and I've organized faculty reading groups for years. I like to choose some book that's too hard to read and invite people from rhetoric and philosophy and film and geography to my house for dinner and talk about the book. I learn a lot from people who come from different disciplines. I certainly think we need others to help us think—we're dangerous when we're alone in our own heads. It's in

those conversations, that, for me, the humanist subject disappears. This is much more than conventional collaboration.

> *About research participants, you say that rather than seeing them as objects of knowledge, they could be thought of as "provocateurs," as lines of flight that take us elsewhere* (St.Pierre, 2011, p. 620*). We found this thought inspiring. Would you talk about this a bit more?*

Foucault wrote that his work was not grounded in the "speaking subject," the thinking, knowing, conscious, speaking subject, but in the discursive formation in which the subject is produced and can speak certain things. And Deleuze was not interested in this description of the subject either. I had studied Deleuze and Foucault and Derrida as a doctoral student, but I really didn't understand their critique of that subject until I was writing my dissertation, which was about subjectivity.

I had done everything I was supposed to do as a qualitative researcher—I had interviewed and observed the old women in my hometown—but I found I couldn't write about them as individuals, I couldn't privilege their "voices" or dig deep into the essence of the women. I finally understood the critiques of the humanist subject I had studied *as I wrote* and mostly by *not being able to write about the women as qualitative methodology told me I should*. I was just beginning then to understand the incompatibility between poststructuralism and humanist qualitative methodology.

But my conversations with the women were provocative and really made me think about subjectivity. So even though I could not ground my work in interview data (their voices), what they told me pushed me to think about subjectivity. Their voices were just some of the "data" that I used to think with—it wasn't primary. I would not do that kind of study today. It was just what I thought I had to do to do a qualitative interview study.

> *Are you saying we shouldn't instrumentalize inquiry?*

Exactly. We have indeed instrumentalized and over-formalized inquiry, and we don't need to do that. A friend of mine who's in rhetoric and studies postmodern theories reminded me that method always comes too late and is always out of date. Method will constrain you.

So when students come to me and say, "But if I'm not using methodology, then how do I know what to do next?" And I say, "I don't know. What do you want to do now? What do you think you need to do now?" And they'll talk and talk, and I'll say, "Well, it sounds as if you want to do such and such—is that what you want to do next"? Usually they say, "Yes," and I so say, "Well then, go do it." What I have to teach them is to read, read, read and then trust themselves. If they don't have anything much to think with, then they won't know what to do. They won't understand what practices the theory enables. If they've read enough, the theory(ies) will guide them in the doing. So they need multiple theories that don't lock them into one set of practices.

As I said earlier, usually we've begun "research" long before the official beginning described in most methodology books. You're living the study, you've been talking with people about this thing you've been interested in for some time, you've been reading about it, finding it in novels and movies. At some point, you have to get a focus and organize your work so you can graduate within a year of two, and

decide what you can do well in that timeframe. Most of us are limited by time and money. But that doesn't mean we have to adopt some pre-existing set of research practices.

> *What makes research research? And do you think we should learn the basics before we deconstruct them?*

I would say that research is whatever we say it is; that is, if enough people say a particular set of thoughts and practices counts as research, then it does. This is much about power, of course. We know that, historically, what counts as research has changed. Just think about qualitative research itself, which is now quite legitimate in many areas of social science but at the beginning was not and is still considered illegitimate by those who favor positivist social science approaches.

As I said, I think that much qualitative research has now become quite positivist and turned into some kind of formalized, systematic process that doesn't serve us well in this new kind of work we're trying to do—this work we're calling the new empiricism, new materialism, post qualitative, post humanism, and so on. The word *research* is so heavy with meaning that I've stopped using it in my teaching and now use the word *inquiry,* which I think is more open. If I use the word *research*, my students immediately want to jump right into research methodology.

And about learning the basics, red lights always begin flashing when I hear the word *basic*—basic for whom? Who gets to decide what's basic, necessary, foundational, etc.? Anything that's considered *basic* is disciplinary, normalizing, and very limiting—it's a construction by those in power who want to control what happens.

> *I'm not sure we have the word "inquiry" in Finnish. Would you use the word curiosity?*

Yes! Foucault said that he did his work on madness, sexuality, and prisons because he was curious about something he saw going on around him. So we might say inquiry begins in curiosity.

> *So do you think that we should just give up on explaining ourselves to the positivists? Because sometimes it's not easy for us as students or new faculty. I think what I'm doing is scientific and rigorous, but they may not.*

At this point, I don't try to argue with the positivists about what counts as science. I did that for six or seven years during the debates in the U.S. about *scientifically based research* (SBR), which was mandated by the U.S. No Child Left Behind Act and promoted by the National Research Council in their 2002 report. We learned that what counted as scientifically based research was positivist social science. I spent about three years reading the early texts that describe logical positivism/logical empiricism, texts from the 1920s and 1930s, and others to try to understand that point of view. I spent years responding at the national level, talking back to the positivists. And it was impossible. There was no point because our ideas were incommensurable. I studied positivism, but the positivists certainly did not study postmodernism! They felt they didn't need to learn anything different because they were very sure that what they were doing was good science. They said qualitative researchers (and postmodernists) were just telling stories, and stories could not count as science. I said that science itself is a big narrative. But

they would not acknowledge that, so I just stopped trying to "talk across differences." I finally decided that the best thing was just to do my work and let them do their work.

But if you're a student trying to write a dissertation or find a job, and you're doing work that some think is outside the "norm," what do you do? I tell my students that you always have to present your work to someone—in a job talk or during an interview and even when you're writing a journal article—so you have to frame your work to help your audience understand it. So do your work and provide the rationale for what you're doing. But do *your* work. There are many people to cite now to legitimate this new work. Maybe ten years ago there weren't. There's just a lot of interesting work going on. But you can say, "Well, I'm doing something different, and these are the assumptions that ground what I'm doing. It may be different from what you're familiar with." You just have to explain what you're doing. You have to be pedagogical, teacherly in explaining. And your work has to be good, better than the ordinary, in fact, if you're doing something different.

And you have to create a space where what you're doing—work that some claim is too different, too "way out there"—is normal and self-evident. It takes a group of people doing very good work to do that, work that is important and significant. And of course that "different" work will become normalized and limiting at some point. Derrida wrote that we're always creating structures; so we need to persistently critique them, try to keep them loose so something else can happen.

> *About writing as a method of inquiry, as analysis, you wrote that it was "the setting-to-work of writing that forced the rupture and demanded that I move on. When writing the next word and the next sentence and then the next is more than one can manage; when one must bring to bear on writing, in writing, what one has read and lived, that is thinking that cannot be taught"* (St.Pierre, 2011, p. 621*). We are curious about how you write and do analysis, how you combine writing and thinking, or do you divide them at all? And how is the material and the discursive entangled in your writing?*

First of all, I really like to write, though it's certainly not easy to sit down and begin writing a journal article or book chapter. I would much rather work in my yard or go to a movie. But after all these years, I know that once I begin writing, things will happen. I'm not an artist or a musician, though some of my students are, and they tell me that the same thing happens to them in their creative work. But writing is my thing. For me, the best writing is thinking, though, obviously, I write different kinds of things for different audiences. I was an English major and taught English and composition and writing pedagogy, so I understand the theory and history of all this, which certainly helps me. Usually, I'm writing a particular piece for a particular audience, and that shapes or bounds the text I write—I'm imagining who'll read it, and I write for them.

But the writing I most enjoy is when I've decided to write about a topic I don't know very well. The challenge then is to do the reading, to commit to finding the time to read about the topic so I can write about it. And then I'm really trying to learn something, and I read and read and read.

I'm a slow reader because I type quotes from the texts I read into what I call "Bettie's Dictionary" that I began when I was a doctoral student. It's just a dictionary of quotations from my reading (about 800 pages now). I also have two other dictionaries—one just for Gilles Deleuze (about 300 pages) and another on the new empiricisms/new materialisms (about 100 pages) because the language and concepts are so different in these two bodies of work. So I read and then type quotations into my dictionaries. Then I have the quotes forever, and they're easy to find in my dictionaries. I am also a

librarian, and librarians are trained to provide access to material, so what I'm doing with this dictionary work is providing access to my reading. I tell my students that they'll never find that wonderful sentence Karen Barad wrote two months from now, but I will because I've put it in my dictionaries. But I'll read for months or years on a topic, like I did for logical positivism. Now I'm studying ontology and empiricism.

Of course, you can read forever. But it's when I have to *use* what I've been reading that I learn, when I have to write. It's when I actually have to put one word after another and one sentence after another that I understand what I don't know—that I don't know enough to write the next sentence. Or it can be as simple as not knowing the transition to use to connect sentences that indicates I'm at a loss. It's that combination of reading and writing that I just love, and I can't write without reading, so, to me, they work together.

And analysis, I'd say thinking is analysis for me. It's in the thinking that writing produces that analysis occurs. I don't limit *analysis* to the way it's generally described in methodology texts.

Finally, I would say that everything is material-discursive, entangled. It always has been.

> *You've talked about reading to get smarter but also about not knowing what to do next—can you say more about what seems to be a contradiction in those different approaches?*

Well, I usually think I'm not smart enough to begin writing. And so I rely on my dictionary. I go back and read all those quotes I've entered for the last 25 years under different words in my dictionaries and count on other scholars' words help me get going. And I'm always buying books on topics I know I'm interested in so I'll have them when I need them. So from my dictionary, I'll move to those books and then begin collecting journal articles to read, and out of all that reading begin to think I'm learning something.

Nonetheless, the more I read, the more I'm aware of what I haven't read yet—all those books and articles I don't know exist. But I can begin to move into, to read in some of those new areas. That's the way scholarship is, and it's the pleasure of this work we do—following the citational trail from one text to another to another.

In academia, you can keep re-inventing yourself because you can always read and write in another area. It can be difficult to do that in many professions, so we're very lucky.

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