Nothing, Anything, and Everything: Conversations on Postqualitative Methodology

Linnea Bodén and Karin Gunnarsson

Abstract

In this article, we elaborate on postqualitative methodology by engaging with two questions: What does postqualitative mean? Why is the postqualitative movement important? The engagement with these questions evokes a conversation, which becomes our methodology. The conversation is an assemblage, always multiple and collective. This allows us to acknowledge the messy and hybrid processes of knowledge production, and it forces us to be responsive to moments and movements, while remaining vague and ambivalent. As such, the postqualitative provides us with nothing. Simultaneously, it offers tools to navigate and can turn into anything. Nonetheless, it implies hope and is therefore everything.

Keywords

postqualitative methodology, research conversations, feminist collaboration, writing as method of inquiry, methods of inquiry

September 28, 2018, 3:38 p.m.

After both mentally and physically learning that the time difference between Stockholm and Phoenix is 7 hr, she was back in bed. During the in-the-middle-of-the-night seminar with David and three students, they had discussed different takes on the “post-qualitative,” and now Linnea was equally excited and exhausted.

November 8, 2018, 6:16 a.m.

A couple of weeks later, an email from David appeared to Linnea.

Greetings! Thank you so much for agreeing to skype into my Global Perspectives on Post Qualitative Inquiry course . . . I pitched the idea of doing a special issue on this topic . . . Per the email below, you would compose a 2500-3500 response to two questions: 1. What does “post-qualitative” mean to you? 2. Why do you think the “post-qualitative” movement is so important to the field of qualitative inquiry?

Linnea wondered what kind of greeting this might be. She was terrified, but the glory of his word shone around her. Instead of keeping all these sayings and pondering them in her heart, Linnea turned to her reliable and trustworthy friend and colleague Karin. They were actually working on a Swedish book on postqualitative methodologies together, so they were a veritable match made in heaven.

November 9, 2018, 10:23 a.m. (Email From Linnea)

Hi BFF! I got this question after the skype seminar I had in September (see email below), and I was thinking: shouldn’t we do this text together?! Hugs Linnea

November 9, 2018, 10:33 a.m. (Email From Karin)

Hola! Yes, how exciting—thanks for the question! I would love to. That’s an impressive list of names he has gotten together. It seems as if the skype seminar went well? HUGS

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How would they respond to the glory of his words? The two researchers decided to do as researchers usually do: start an intense conversation around the topic. But time flew, as it often does, and suddenly it was mid-March.

**March 20, 2019 (Karin and Linnea, Text Messages)**

Hi BFF! A spontaneous question, would you like to meet for lunch tomorrow? Around 1145-13? Hugs

Yes!! At SU?
[Stockholm University]
Yes, Studenthuset or A-huset? ♥
What about Student? Sushi☺
Great. See you at 1145

**March 21, 2019 (at Studenthuset, Stockholm University)**

“So, what about these questions . . .” Karin begins. “What do they do with us? Have we turned into research informants or maybe even research objects, forced to answer predetermined questions? Are the questions and how they are asked post-qualitative?”

“Yes . . .,” Linnea slowly responds, and continues by asking,

“. . . what do the questions about the meaning and the importance do, and how on earth do you write a paper if we are simultaneously researchers and the ones being researched? Maybe we are researching ourselves . . . What if we start with the Skype seminar, and through this also start responding to what post-qualitative means to us? I have been really inspired by both Patti [Lather, 2013] and Elisabeth St. Pierre [2011, 2013, 2014; see also Lather & St Pierre, 2013]. One of the things I talked about during the seminar was the paper on intraviews [Bodén, 2015] I wrote a couple of years ago. I was interested in the format of the interview, of trying to play with it to see if or how new or unexpected things could happen within that methodological practice. In the paper, I argue that intraviews—inspired by the Baradian (Barad 2003, 2007) concept of intraaction—might push the limits of conventional qualitative methodologies by creating affective possibilities for what I described as “materialities to be acknowledged in the methodological process and be a part of the apparatus of knowing” [Bodén, 2015, p. 197]. In hindsight, it feels like the focus on how the materialities affect the production of knowledge becomes a bit overemphasized at the expense of other things, I guess that if I would have written that paper today, I would have tried to put more emphasis on relations rather than on materialities.”

Karin rises to get some more water—the Japanese soy is always so salty—and when she gets back, Linnea says,

“This is one of the things I find most difficult. How have you dealt with this complexity of focusing on relations rather than on separate entities in your research? I know that we have worked with different philosophers, and encountered this tension in different ways.”

“Yes, for me,” Karin answers, “I was and am still quite cautious about claiming the Baradian notion of the relation before the relata and in my thesis I worked with the label “post-constructionism” (Lykke, 2010). I think it also had to do with being situated within education, where students and teachers are very much regarded as the main actors, so I slowly tried to shift the focus on, or at least blur, how materialities—the more-than-human—act and transform within different practices. Coming from poststructural theory, questions about the subject, discourse, power relations, and performativity were always put on the fore. This approach paved the way for the posthuman and performative ontology embracing the nonhuman forces and affirmative aspects. The critical posthumanism advocated by Rosi Braidotti ([whose words/text join us at the lunch] 2019), work this transition within the critical theories of poststructuralism into posthumanist thinking and ontology. Braidotti (2019, p. 7) beautifully shows how it is not only a matter of what or who “we” are but “what we are in the process of becoming,” not merely as social constructs but including bodies, spaces, and events, and how they are part of this process. Then, power and knowledge are vital forces of sociomaterial collectivities, as I have argued in my most recent article (Gunnarsson, 2019). This makes clear to me how the posthuman philosophy deals with such things as power and performativity but also allows us to raise alternative questions and offer possibilities of addressing the situated and transformative.”

“So, it’s the research problem that steers what theoretical concepts and approach you need?” Linnea asks.

“And the other way around! The theoretical concepts transform the research problems, but the reciprocal relation within the research apparatus all together creates what knowledges that the research enables us to produce.”

“I agree! Jessica Ringrose described this nicely at a seminar: “Make hybrid things that work for your project!” [see also Ringrose & Zarabadi, 2018]. Maybe this could also be the case when it comes to empirical material. In relation to the post-qualitative, I think that what is considered as empirical material is extended. Or disrupted [Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2017] and becomes hybridized as it becomes more difficult to decide when data starts or ends—what is data? In a way, you and me talking about the post-qualitative, and then eventually writing about it, inserting new things into the conversation "in the
thinking that writing produced” [St. Pierre, 2011, p. 621, italics in the original] could also be thought of as some kind of data production.”

“This could be our way of acting as informants, describing what the post-qualitative means to us. Really well-behaved, actually answering the questions we are asked,” Karin says laughingly.

“So, thinking with Braidotti, who sets up a list of quite open and demanding methodological guidelines [2019, p. 16], to actually work with the postqualitative aspects means to be responsive to the moment and the movement and embrace the multiple and the collective. Which means, according to Braidotti, a knowledge production that is “undoing the human” [2019, p. 4], whatever that could mean? Then, the postqualitative methodology must remain vague and ambivalent since it involves creating an imaginative and fluid practice.”

“Karin, if you and I for now are simultaneously the research problem, the objects of the research, and the researchers, then this conversation is our methodology,” says Linnea.

“Maybe we have moved on to the second question, regarding the importance of the post qualitative movement? I have to get back to the office now, and I actually have time to start writing something. If I email you this afternoon, we could maybe continue the conversation over email”???

March 21, 2019, 16:08 p.m. (Email From Linnea)

Hi and thanks for the lunch!! Here’s a very tentative draft, with references to the Bible ☺ Hugs Linnea

March 22, 2019, 10:01 p.m. (Email From Karin)

Thanks for a cozy and creative lunch, and now the beginning of a text. I have read it and think it looks exciting—this could unfold into something good. Recoiled a bit at the word “data collection”—but maybe that’s a good thing? I won’t be able to work with the text until next Friday and the week after that. But if you have time you could continue. Let’s keep in touch, HUGS

April Fool’s Day, 2019 (Word Document From Linnea)

Thinking about our lunch and looking back at the emails, we are talking through a word document. “Why do you think the ‘post-qualitative’ movement is so important to the field of qualitative inquiry?” First things first: I don’t know how you would respond to this, Karin, but I think this is a moment when I feel like an informant and at the same time an annoying researcher who cannot help deconstructing the question: Is it a movement? Are you and I part of that movement? And, do we think it is important? Since we are writing a Swedish book on the topic, I guess the answer to all of these questions should be “yes.” But at the same time, I am not totally convinced. It has sometimes been argued that through the postqualitative movement, we could and should abandon many of the things connected to conventional qualitative inquiry. However, as you and I have discussed with our colleagues at Stockholm University, we need MORE methodologies, and different methodologies, rather than less. This is inspired by what Hillevi Lenz Taguchi has stated in a recent interview:

My argument for multiple or more, rather than less methods, and more and more innovative epistemologies and methodologies, rather than less . . . reflects this urgency of not just knowing more, but knowing together with the agents the questions concern, and of knowing well. This means knowing ethically and sustainably—in relation to these agents and in relation to the context and world in which they and we live together. (Lenz Taguchi, et al. 2020)

Thus, the postqualitative could become a way of challenging the binaries between the researcher and what is researched, and as you wrote in your dissertation, enable an experimentation with qualitative methodological concepts like data, interviews, observations and analysis (Gunnarsson, 2015, p. 66). Shouldn’t the text you just sent me work really well here? Hope it is ok if I paste it?

March 28, 2019 (Word Document From Karin, Pasted by Linnea)

In earlier work, I articulated this as a way of touching, trying, and doubting together with the investigated practice. When trying to conceptualize what educational action research could become together with a posthumanist approach, I rethink the notion of collaboration as a distributed practice where actors “afford each other their existence and their capabilities” (Mol, 2010, p. 265, in Gunnarsson, 2018). Knowledge production becomes a relational experiment with messy co-becomings of researcher, participants, theory, and empirical material. Hey, just realized that this is actually pretty close to what I—together with Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, Emilie Moberg and Carol Taylor—discuss in terms of a methodological sensibility! (Bodén et al., 2019), We discuss this as part of relational materialism, closely related to and inspired by the work of Mol (and Law; cf. Law & Mol, 1995) (Comment inserted by Linnea, April 24, 2019). It thus forces us to be involved
in the educational arrangements, acknowledging how the research practice is actually involved with transforming this practice and not only observing it. I have thought about this in terms of “an experimental togetherness” (Stengers, 2005, p. 195). With inspiration from Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman, who argue that “We need to shift from thinking about methods as processes of gathering data toward methods as a becoming entangled in relations” (Truman, 2018, p. 204, in Gunnarsson, 2018). “Becoming entangled,” staying and thinking with that phrase, saying it once more, “becoming entangled.” What does that mean and how can we as researchers acknowledge the fact that we become entangled?

March 31, 2019, 5:58 p.m. (Email From Karin)
Hi! Now when I read the text you sent me this Friday, nothing of the things I wrote in the version I sent to you are kept?? Are there different versions or have you decided to remove it?? I’m a bit confused (empirical material–affect @ HUGS

March 31, 2019, 6:24 p.m. (Email From Linnea)
What! That’s weird. I only saw your comments, not that you’ve written something! Could you paste the things you’ve written or should I check the document you sent me and paste it. Hugs!!

March 31, 2019, 7:32 p.m. (Email From Karin)
It was interwoven with the text. Now I have colored it. See if it might fit with the things you wrote this Friday. HUGS

April 1, 2019, 3:03 p.m. (Email From Linnea)
Hi!! I have worked some more, I think it’s so much fun to do this. Hugs Linnea

April 1, 2019, 3:07 p.m. (Email From Karin)
Great! I also have the time to work with the paper tomorrow. Could we work in Drive? HUGS

April 1, 2019, 10:53 p.m. (Email From Linnea)
Hi! Of course, we could try it. But I’m a bit hesitant in relation to font, margins, and so on. Let’s chat tomorrow morning. Hugs!

April Fool’s Day: why not fool the chronology of the text by inserting something from the future; lirpa, lirpa?

April 12, 2019 (Karin, on a Digital Platform)
Returning to the question of why all this fuss is important? In connection with the urgent problems of today, such as eurocentrism, racism, sexism, climate change and so on, there is a possibility of bearing some hope by realizing that the future is open: “the future is built upon the knowledge we produce” (Gunnarsson & Hohti, 2018, p. 3). It creates a certain responsibility and urges us to ask which worldings erupt out of this knowledge. And this is why the notion and doing of affirmative critique becomes so crucial within the postqualitative methodology. It opens up possibilities of thinking differently, not only focusing on stabilizations and trappings, but emphasizing potentialities for inventing and imagining possible futures (Braidotti, 2010). In other words, to critically and creatively interrogate the present.

April Fool’s Day and April 12, 2019 (Linnea, Word Document and on a Digital Platform)
In relation to feminist theory and to what the reader has already read above (but what is not yet written since I guess you, Karin, will write it sometime during next week), postqualitative methodology helps us to zoom in on what has previously been understood as marginal and nonagentic in different settings. This feminist imperative helps us question the central position of the huMan in the research process as this human is usually male, White, urbanized, heterosexual, and so on, as Braidotti (2013, p. 65) writes. If the postqualitative helps us to highlight this, I think it is a movement to put some of our trust in, even on April 1. However, I don’t see the postqualitative as a rejection of qualitative methodologies but rather “on a continuum that takes important insights from qualitative methodologies but slightly shifts the focus to include both human and nonhuman agency” (Bodén, 2016, p. 49). I think it is important to emphasize how this movement continuously morphs and moves. Maybe it should be described as multiple movements. I guess the focus on empirical work, rather than merely theoretical or philosophical writings, together with both human and nonhuman agents, has interested me, at least, the most.
April 2 and April 12, 2019 (Karin and Linnea, on Digital Platform and at Karin’s Place)

How to conclude this conversation, now that we are back together again, not at Studenthuset but at a digital platform, that so far hasn’t destroyed our fonts? And later, back together at Karin’s dinner table? We have responded to the two questions, most of the time in agreement, sometimes through different theoretical lenses, but always with an affirmative curiosity in relation to each other. Lots of emails, lots of Hugs!! and HUGS. Nonetheless, what could be said about the conversation is that it both did and did not happen in the way we have unfolded it here. The conversation becomes a mixture of time and space, as some of the things referred to as part of the text hadn’t yet been written when that particular reference was made. Furthermore, emails and text messages were sent that didn’t necessarily fit into a published paper, and nästan hela diskussionen ägde rum på svenska [most of the conversation took place in Swedish], translated into English. Except for the parts emerging through Word and Drive. It’s been edited, by the two of us, by reviewers and by editors. It is in some ways pretty close to a collaborative autoethnography (if this is even a thing). What is nonetheless certain is that we have needed a lot of other things than merely ourselves to answer these questions. We needed the everyday exchanges and the many text messages and emails with hugs, BFF’s and emojis: a blurring of the private and the professional as a feminist strategy to encourage and continue the exploration. It’s more than us, it’s more than words, as Noora sings ironically and not so ironically to William in SKAM (2016).

What produced our understanding of being research objects, informants, researchers, friends and colleagues, was very much the process of the collaborative conversation. It was chiseled through our writing and rewriting, through our comments to each other—“Isn’t this section too long? Maybe it would work better if we merge some of your words into mine? What do you think about this concept? Is it ok if I add a reference to SKAM?”—through time and space, in which the text was constantly chopped into convenient mouthfuls. Not unlike the nigiri at our first meeting, which actually wasn’t our first meeting at all. There was an angel, but it appeared to Linnea much later, at her office after the sushi, mainly as a help to begin the written piece. If it wasn’t enough to mess with an angel (or an angle), the Father of time, Mr. Chronos, who divides time into past, present, and future, was continuously fooled by the emails sent, the word documents inserted, the text messages, and so on. And we were, as you readers are, fooled again and again by the text and its linearity. This is nothing unique about our conversation, but significant to research. However, what a postqualitative engagement might enable is the acknowledgment of the tinkering, the chopping, the mangling, and the ongoing (re)production. As such, this written piece could be understood not only as a conversation on a postqualitative methodology, but also as an ongoing exercise in the performance of a postqualitative methodology. The two questions thus transform us and our answers into synchronized entrances and closures.

So, when we together tried to summarize what postqualitative methodologies could become or do, we ended up with three things: no-thing, any-thing, and every-thing. As has been said many times, the postqualitative methodology does not provide any neat instructions and is no handbook approach. As such, it provides us with nothing. Instead, it offers us a tool to navigate and can turn into anything. But it implies hope and therefore is everything.

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Note

1. [...] indicates that all references during the spoken conversation were added afterward.

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Author Biographies

Linnea Bodén (PhD) is a senior lecturer at the Department of Child and Youth Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden. Inspired by posthumanist and new materialist perspectives, her research has a specific interest in entangling theoretical explorations and empirical engagements. In her recent project, she focuses on young children’s perspective and experiences of being part of a scientific research project. Emphasizing ethics, she has explored methodologies to work with these questions together with the participating children.

Karin Gunnarsson (PhD) is a senior lecturer at the Department of Education, Stockholm University. Her research involves methodological questions concerning collaborative research approaches together with an affirmative critique. Her recent work explores teaching and learning with a specific interest in question about equality and norms within a feminist posthumanist framework.