

POST-QUALITATIVE INQUIRY IN SPORT, HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Edited by Alan Ovens
and Aspasia Dania

ADVANCES IN RESEARCH
ON TEACHING

VOLUME 50

POST-QUALITATIVE INQUIRY IN
SPORT, HEALTH AND PHYSICAL
EDUCATION

ADVANCES IN RESEARCH ON TEACHING

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EDITED BY

ALAN OVENS

University of Auckland, New Zealand

AND

ASPASIA DANIA

University of Athens, Greece



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

Alan Owens is an Associate Professor of Sport, Health and Physical Education at the University of Auckland. His research explores the interacting themes of education, well-being and human movement. This work focuses on the social justice pedagogies and how these emerge and become enabled and constrained within contemporary settings.

Aspasia Dania is an Associate Professor of Physical Education Teacher Education at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece. Her research interests focus on teacher education and professional development, post-qualitative research, innovative pedagogies, art-based methods and embodiment, all focusing on social justice.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Eeva Anttila works as a Professor in dance pedagogy at University of the Arts, Helsinki, Finland, and leads the MA programme for dance pedagogy. Her research interests include dialogical and critical dance pedagogy and embodied learning. She is actively involved in national and international dance and arts education organisations and journals and has published several articles and book chapters nationally and internationally, including *Critical Articulations of Hope: International practices and perspectives* (Routledge, 2019).

Zuleyha Avsar is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Physical Education and Sport at the Bursa Uludag University Sport Science Faculty at Bursa, Turkiye. Her research interest addresses physical education and sport pedagogy, which includes pre-service teacher education, curriculum development, assessment and evaluation, accreditation and creative drama in the PETE curriculum. She is currently serving as the evaluator of the National Teacher Education Accreditation Programme EPDAD and National Physical Education Teacher Education Accreditation Programme SPORAK.

Christie C. Byers, Ph.D., is an education scholar working across the areas of science education, process philosophy, neurodiversity studies, qualitative inquiry and post/para activism. After a long career as a PK-8 teacher, she earned a Ph. D. focused on exploring experiences of wonder and why they matter for human development and education practices. She currently teaches in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, USA.

Fiona Chambers is an award-winning Full Professor in Education (Sport and Innovation) with 30 years of academic experience in sport, innovation and education. She is a highly experienced teacher educator and a two-time TEDX speaker. As a Hasso Plattner Institute certified design thinking coach, and a LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® facilitator, Fiona is a global leader in creative research methodologies. Fiona currently serves as the elected President of the Association Internationale des Écoles Supérieures d'Éducation Physique (*AIE-SEP*) and the elected Vice President of *CEREPS* (the European Research Council for Physical Education and School Sport).

Yuan-Yuan Chan is pursuing her Ph.D. in Organizations and Social Change track at the College of Management, University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research explores workplace discrimination and career decisions, with a focus on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) in relation to women,

LGBTQI+, and East Asian immigrant identities, aiming to promote more inclusive and friendly work environments.

Bryan C. Clift is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism at North Carolina State University, USA. He is also an honorary Senior Lecturer and the founder of the Centre for Qualitative Research at the University of Bath, UK.

Jessica Francombe-Webb is a Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in the Department for Health at the University of Bath, UK. She is an affiliate member of the Centre for Equality in Sport, Physical Activity and Health and Centre for Qualitative Research.

Elizabet Kaitell is a Senior Lecturer in Learning and Teaching at Kingston University, UK. Her research focuses on arts-based inquiry, embodied learning and post-qualitative research. She has presented at national and international conferences, including BERA, and has contributed to BERA and SEDA's blogs, writing on embodied pedagogy and a/r/tography.

Bettina Kolb is a Lecturer at the Department of Sociology, University of Vienna, and teaches qualitative and visual methods. She is a social scientist and a specialist in visual sociology using photo interview in inter- and transdisciplinary research in health, urban public space and sustainability as a senior researcher in "Oikodrom – The Vienna Institute for Urban Sustainability."

Mirka Koro (Ph.D., University of Helsinki) is a Professor of qualitative research and the Director of doctoral programmes at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University, AZ, USA. Her scholarship operates in the intersection of qualitative inquiry, methodologies, philosophy and sociocultural critique.

Danielle Layton is a student in the Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies Ph.D. programme at Indiana University, Bloomington. She is interested in discourse analysis and methodologies of possibility, exploring how new futures are constructed out of present contexts. She studies how the construction of justice policies, practices and concepts in public comment, online discourses and academic literature bases make new conceptualisations possible and make current epistemic norms visible.

Pierre Lescoat is an Assistant Professor of Accounting and Control at Neoma Business School, where he teaches various courses ranging from management control at the bachelor level to the sociology of quantification in the doctoral programme. His research is interdisciplinary and uses mainly qualitative methodologies. He is interested in organisational evaluation practices and related issues such as professional equality, diversity and merit. His current research focuses on market intermediaries in two sectors: the financial industry and the arts. Pierre is also interested in collaborative research and action research. He has recently been involved in projects along these lines. Before joining Neoma,

Pierre worked as a consultant in the public sector and the media and telecommunications industries. Pierre's research has been published in *Gender, Work and Organization* and by Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Jessica Nina Lester is a Professor of Qualitative Methodology in the School of Education at Indiana University, Bloomington. She is a qualitative methodologist and an interdisciplinary researcher who publishes in areas related to qualitative method/ology, with a particular focus on discourse and conversation analysis methods, digital tools/spaces in qualitative research and disability in critical qualitative inquiry. In much of her substantive research, she has sought to examine and illustrate how everyday and institutional language use makes visible what and who becomes positioned as normal and abnormal in relation to the oft taken-for-granted normality-abnormality binary.

Ryan Weichieh Liao is a doctoral student in Business Administration at National Taiwan University, majoring in Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management. His research focuses on work design, self and identity, meaning-making and issues related to Chinese Indigenous perspectives. Ryan is well-versed in qualitative methods, particularly grounded theory and narrative analysis. He hopes to develop Chinese Indigenous perspectives and insights within the Management and Organizational Studies (MOS) field.

Laura S. Lorenz is a visiting research scholar at Brandeis University and a co-founder and educator at PhotovoiceWorldwide. She has a Ph.D. in health policy and health services research and an MEd in Instructional Design. She is an educator, a researcher and a published author whose areas of expertise include qualitative research, participatory visual research, community-based participatory research, lived experience with chronic conditions and professional continuing education.

Emmanouela Mandalaki is an Associate Professor of Organizations at NEOMA Business School. In her research, Emmanouela explores dynamics and asymmetries between cognitive and corporeal factors shaping ethical and affective interpersonal interactions in social and organisational contexts, including methods of academic research and writing, to provide alternative perspectives to her subjects of inquiry.

Keiko M. McCullough, University of Denver, United States, is an Assistant Professor of Counselling Psychology in the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver. Dr. McCullough publishes in areas related to method/ology, media studies and psychology, with an interest in uncovering how psychological constructs are produced and maintained in media (and other visual domains) in connection to systems of inequality.

Alison Morag Murray leads on Primary Health and Well-being and supports secondary Physical Education Initial Teacher Education at the University of Stirling. Her specific research interest is in enhancing agency through movement education, developing across the lifelong developmental continuum. Alison has been involved in projects that explore pedagogies for physical education and

whole school practice embodying physically active learning, with colleagues and student teachers.

Jared M. Poole is an Assistant Professor of Management at the University of Massachusetts Boston. His research focuses on racialised organisations and the philosophy of social science. He holds a Ph.D. in Business Administration from the University of Utah.

Kathryn Riley, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in Curriculum, Teaching and Learning with the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba (Winnipeg, Canada). As a past teacher of Physical, Health and Outdoor Environmental Education, Kathryn's research is primarily focused on relational pedagogies for (w)holistic well-being and an anticolonial praxis for social and ecological justice. Kathryn is currently the Principal Investigator for two research projects, *Movement as Artivism* project, which explores physical activity and arts-based practices in response to eco-anxiety and *Decolonising Physical Literacy*, both with middle-years teachers and learners in Winnipeg, Canada. Kathryn is an Associate Editor with the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*.

Hayley McGlashan-Fainu (Te Aupōuri) is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Education at Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland. She teaches and researches in health education, physical education, gender and sexuality, post-colonial feminist theory, Kaupapa Māori and critical ethnography.

Stephanie Merchant is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in the Department for Health at the University of Bath, UK. She is Deputy Director of the Centre for Equality in Sport, Physical Activity and Health and an affiliate member of the Centre for Qualitative Research.

Jean M. Uasike Allen is of Tongan and European heritage, born and raised in South Auckland, Aotearoa-New Zealand. She has a passion for education and justice. As such, her research interests focus primarily on disrupting colonial ways of knowing, being, see, feeling and doing by centring Indigenous and Pacific knowledges, privileging youth voices, critiquing whiteness and employing arts-based methods as a means of exploring knowledge and re-presentation.

STEPPING OFF THE MAP: AN INVITATION TO POST-QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Alan Ovens^a and Aspasia Dania^b

^a*University of Auckland, New Zealand*

^b*University of Athens, Greece*

ABSTRACT

In this opening chapter, readers are introduced to post-qualitative inquiry, which challenges the confines of traditional research methodologies. The chapter provides an accessible overview of the key characteristics of post-qualitative inquiry, emphasising its departure from conventional qualitative and quantitative approaches. Through relatable examples, readers gain an understanding of how post-qualitative research embraces complexity, dynamic perspectives, and innovative forms of inquiry within the field of sport, health, and physical education.

Keywords: Post-qualitative research; post-structuralism; new materialism; wayfinding; attunement; disruption

INTRODUCTION

As we walk through unfamiliar landscapes, our journey unfolds,

Each step a choice, each bend an invitation,

Our journey attuned to what's around.

The trail suggests, invites, but doesn't bind,

If we are free to explore, not follow, we create something new

Research and hiking intertwined.

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Imagine setting out on a hiking trail through an unfamiliar landscape with the promise of a new adventure. The moment you step onto a trail, you create the possibility of a journey. The trail guides, suggests, and invites, but it does not dictate the experience you will have. Even if two people set out together, side by side, their journeys will never be identical. One might pause to take in the crisp scent of the forest while the other charges ahead, eager to reach the summit. The same incline that exhilarates one hiker may exhaust another. And when they stand together at the lookout, gazing at the same horizon, their eyes will settle on different details, drawn to different aspects of the landscape by the unique perspectives they embody. Research, like hiking, is often imagined as a structured expedition, one that moves predictably from point A to point B. Conventional methodologies promise clear directions, reliable signposts, and well-defined outcomes. But what if inquiry was less like following a map and more like wayfinding, a process of moving through terrain that is constantly shifting, always contingent, always shaped by the forces, encounters, and rhythms of the moment?

Post-qualitative inquiry invites us to rethink how we move through research. It asks us to consider the possibility that knowledge is not something to be extracted from some pre-existing context using some pre-determined method, but something that emerges in movement, shaped by the paths we take, the pauses we make, and the perspectives we bring. Just as no two hikers walk the same trail in exactly the same way, no two researchers experience inquiry in identical terms. Even when we seem to be working with the same materials, concepts, data, theory, we are always becoming something different in the process. This rethinking is not merely conceptual, it is profoundly embodied. To move post-qualitatively is to feel the weight of movement itself, to recognise that knowledge is not a static object but a relational and material unfolding. Inquiry, then, is less about reaching a preordained destination and more about traversing the unknown, attuning to what emerges, and learning to navigate without the illusion of certainty.

In sport, health, and physical education research this uncertainty does not mean methodological weakness, incongruence or pitfall; instead, it allows the researcher to be sensitive to the strangeness of the world. It provides space for experiences of astonishment, mystery, and breakdown. As the researcher traverses the unknown, no trace of memory or previous experience can produce meanings or evidence along these trails, since both the trail itself and its mapping are always in formation. Within this constantly changing landscape, numerous entities may appear in our way (e.g., conversations, situations, objects, policies). We may either pass these entities without noticing their presence, or stumble upon them and feel rather unstable. We believe that this instability is important since it allows us to perceive or experience our inquiries in sport, health, and physical education as an iterative process of sense making and unmaking. Our goal is not to arrive at fixed or universal claims. What we seek is to interrogate the way that we plug into ideas and conceptual territories as we relate, experience, and connect to the situations, events, and instances of our journey.

Our aim in editing this book is to extend an invitation, perhaps even a provocation, to think differently about research in sport, health, and physical education. This is not an invitation to follow a new method, nor to exchange one structured approach for another, but rather to engage with the challenge of inquiry itself. But we know this is not an easy task. Even the starting point of asking, *What is post-qualitative inquiry?* is already to seek a certainty that this form of inquiry disrupts. Post-qualitative inquiry (PQI) unsettles the very notion of stable definitions, resisting the impulse to contain knowledge within pre-determined categories. Definitions impose order where as PQI opens possibilities. It is, as [St. Pierre \(2023\)](#) suggests, not about following pre-established paths but about dwelling in uncertainty, allowing thought to move and transform through engagement with philosophy, concepts, and encounters.

With this in mind, we ask: What happens when we step off the map? What if, instead of following a (pre)determined route, we allow inquiry to take us in unexpected directions? Just as hikers eventually find themselves at an endpoint, perhaps not the one they originally set out for, joined by others with their own experiences and stories to share, researchers engaged in PQI find themselves in conversation with multiple ways of knowing, shaped by diverse experiences, encounters, and movements. The contributors to this book exemplify this challenge. Each, in their own way, is working to apply the ideas and principles of PQI to their research, exploring how inquiry unfolds when we move beyond the familiar contours of qualitative methodologies.

We begin this chapter by inviting you to step into the terrain of inquiry not as a traveller following a set course, but as a wayfinder, navigating the unfolding world with curiosity and openness. Rather than searching for fixed destinations, we invite you to attune to the shifting landscapes of knowledge, to notice what emerges, and to embrace the uncertainties that animate post-qualitative research. We conclude by providing a summary of the chapters that make up the rest of the book, each offering a distinct engagement with PQI, each an experiment in what it might mean to research differently.

THE DISRUPTION: WHEN THE MAP NO LONGER MATCHES THE TERRAIN

It happens almost imperceptibly at first,

a subtle misalignment

between expectation and experience.

A voice struggles to articulate an experience,

An observation takes on an unexpected intensity,

An affective resonance that can't be reduced to coded themes.

Data resists its cage,

and meaning spills beyond the lines.

The map dissolves

and you step into the unknown.

This moment when the map dissolves is not a failure of research, but an opening or call to rethink what it means to inquire. It is a moment of encountering what St. Pierre (2011) describes as the limits of conventional qualitative methodologies, which often attempt to confine complex, fluid realities into rigid structures. It is where post-qualitative inquiry begins, not as a rejection of qualitative research, but as a recognition that the very ontology of research needs rethinking (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). Conventional qualitative research, particularly in sport, health, and physical education, has long been rooted in humanist assumptions that prioritise representation, voice, and meaning-making through language (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). The researcher's role has been to capture and categorise, to impose coherence upon the messiness of lived experience. However, as MacLure (2013) provocatively argues, some things defy representation (for example, sensations, affects, material forces, and nonhuman agencies) and do not fit neatly into thematic categories or structured narratives.

Consider, for example, the concept of the body, a central focus in sport, health, and physical education. To study the body is not simply to describe it but to become attuned to its materiality, sensuality, connectivity, and affect (Smith & Ovens, 2014). Yet, conventional research often reduces the body to either a biological entity (measuring physiological responses and anatomical structures) or a subjective experience (documenting athletes' or coaches' narratives about embodiment) (Ovens & Powell, 2011). What if, instead, we acknowledged the body as an assemblage; an entangled, dynamic entity that exceeds both representation and measurement? What if an activity, such as surfing or tennis, emerges from the intra-action of different bodies (such as human bodies, bodies of knowledge, and environmental bodies)? What if a body is not merely an object of study, but an active participant in research, always becoming through its intra-actions with the material and social world? Post-qualitative inquiry takes these questions seriously. It refuses the pretence of methodological neutrality, recognising that research does not merely document reality, it produces it (Barad, 2007; Fullagar, 2017). Inquiry is an entangled, emergent process where the researcher, the researched, and the more-than-human world intra-act (Barad, 2014). In other words, research is never a neutral observation but an event, a *worlding* practice that creates new possibilities for knowing (Camiré, 2025).

Another point of disruption occurs when we realise that qualitative research has been overwhelmingly anthropocentric, concerned primarily with human voices, experiences, and meanings. What about the feel of a climbing wall beneath the hands of an athlete, the resistance of water against a swimmer's body, or the affective energy of a crowded stadium? These forces are not just background conditions; they are active agents in shaping human experience (Fox & Alldred, 2016). From a post-qualitative perspective bodies are not just sites of

meaning-making but are entangled with material-discursive forces (Smith & Ovens, 2014). These more-than-human forces may shape and be shaped by our experiences within sport, health, and physical education. A soccer ball does not simply exist as an inert object; it intra-acts with the athlete, the turf, the air resistance, the regulations of the game, and the cultural narratives that surround sport. The athlete-ball relationship is not merely symbolic but material, shaping possibilities for movement, skill development, and embodied knowing (Markula, 2019). If research is to truly engage with these complexities, it cannot rely on human-centred methods that privilege verbal accounts and discursive analysis. Instead, it needs to embrace methodologies that are attuned to materiality, affect, and relational entanglements (Manning, 2016). This is why post-qualitative research often turns to experimental and creative practices, body mapping, sensory ethnography, artistic methodologies, and moving-image inquiries to explore how knowledge moves, emerges, and transforms rather than simply being extracted (Springgay & Truman, 2018).

A third disruption occurs when the role of the researcher is questioned. In conventional research methods, the researcher is positioned as an observer, someone who collects, interprets, and reports on the experiences of others. But what if research is not about standing outside and looking in, but about being immersed within the entanglement of knowing? A coach, for instance, does not simply instruct from the sidelines; they respond, adapt, feel, and attune to the dynamic flow of the game, engaging in a relational process with athletes, space, and movement. What if research was like that? What if the researcher is not a neutral observer but an active participant in a constantly unfolding field of relations? Post-qualitative inquiry challenges the foundation of detached objectivity, replacing it with a commitment to immersion, responsiveness, and co-becoming (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). As Fullagar (2017) notes, the researcher's own embodied experience must be acknowledged as part of the inquiry, not as a source of bias but as a site of knowing in its own right.

The 'post' researcher belongs and resides to the same system or world which he/she interrogates. In this sense, the difficulty lies in his/her effort to deconstruct established patterns of conceptual order and pursue alternative understandings that escape notions of essence or structure. Deconstruction, however, does not imply something that is done to a concept by the researcher. In the 'post', a concept, or a structure undoes itself (Derrida, 1976). Events of deconstruction are not imposed or enacted as a reaction towards traditional forms of inquiry. Instead, deconstruction rises as an argument that interrogates the signs of presence or the structure of identity. That is the reason why binary oppositions such as identity vs difference, or self vs other cannot be secured. The opening of structure, even though it may not mean rejection, may overturn or displace what we have been used to encounter as methodological foundations or theoretical frameworks.

The moment when the map no longer matches the terrain is not a moment of failure, it is an invitation. An invitation to question what we take for granted about research. An invitation to move beyond rigid methodologies and embrace the contingency, fluidity, and emergence of knowing. Post-qualitative inquiry is

not about replacing one method with another; it is about rethinking the very nature of research itself, what it means to inquire, to move with knowledge, and to embrace uncertainty as a space of possibility. In sport, health, and physical education, where bodies move, adapt, and intra-act with environments, shouldn't our research move too?

THE COMPASS INSTEAD OF THE MAP: POST-QUALITATIVE INQUIRY AS A WAYFINDING PRACTICE

*You set out, map in hand,
a path promised, a course planned.
But the map was drawn from far above,
a flattened world, a distant gaze,
it cannot hear the rustling leaves,
or feel the hush of morning haze.
It does not sense the softened ground,
the hush of dew, the breath you take.
The map is still, but you are moving.
Step forward, let the trail awake.*

This is the moment when you put away the map and reach for a compass instead. Unlike the map, the compass does not dictate a precise route, it orients your movement. It offers direction rather than certainty. It allows you to navigate in relation to the terrain as it unfolds, rather than imposing a fixed pathway upon it. Putting away the map means engaging in research-as-expression in a Deleuzian sense. Deleuze conceptualises expression as an unfolding process that does not rely on representation but instead emerges through the dynamic interplay of forces, affects, and material relations (Deleuze, 1990). Research in this sense is immanent to the assemblage of inquiry, shaping and being shaped by its entanglements (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This is what PQI invites us to do in research: to let go of rigid methodological scripts and instead move with inquiry, responding to its unfolding possibilities rather than attempting to control them.

Conventional qualitative inquiry, much like map-reading, relies on stable methodological coordinates, research questions, theoretical frameworks, structured data collection, and step-by-step analysis. It presumes a world that can be mapped, measured, and known in advance, treating research as an act of capturing rather than co-creating knowledge (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). Post-qualitative inquiry disrupts this cartographic logic by proposing an alternative: wayfinding. The concept of wayfinding, drawn from Indigenous navigation practices and non-representational geography (Ingold, 2000), describes

moving through a landscape by attuning to relational cues rather than following a predetermined route. Wayfinding is about reading the environment, sensing patterns, responding to shifting conditions, and being open to detours and unexpected encounters (Springgay & Truman, 2018). In post-qualitative inquiry, the researcher becomes a wayfinder, navigating a living field of inquiry rather than applying pre-formed methods. Instead of following a methodological script, the researcher moves in response to concepts, affects, materialities, and emergent encounters (St. Pierre, 2019). Becoming is a part of this process, creating new forms of thinking without relying on methodologies that pre-determine the terrain. In PQI, it is simply impossible to approach research as a technical process, selecting a method, applying it, and producing results, since there can be no clear-cut distinctions between what a research assemblage is and what it does. Research shifts continuously from being to becoming.

This requires a radical shift from applying methodologies to thinking with concepts (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Lenz Taguchi, 2016; St Pierre, 2019). Deleuze and Guattari (1994) describe concepts as living entities, not static definitions but dynamic forces that create new ways of thinking. In this view, research does not start with a question that demands an answer; it begins with concepts that provoke thought. The goal is not to gain a more accurate understanding of reality. Rather, it is about finding more complex and creative ways of interacting with our reality, which we can then use to interact in yet more complex and creative ways (Osberg et al., 2008; St. Pierre, 2011). For example, in sport and physical education research, we often study coaching as a process of instruction, feedback, and skill acquisition. But what if we reoriented our research around the concept of attunement? Instead of coding for coaching techniques, we might explore how coaches and athletes co-regulate movement, affect, and relational energy in ways that defy standard descriptions (Fullagar & Pavlidis, 2021). The shift from methodology-driven research to concept-driven inquiry allows us to move beyond familiar categories and engage with research as a creative, experimental process (MacLure, 2013).

A key implication of wayfinding is that the researcher does not seek to control the inquiry process. Instead, the research process moves on its own intensities, emerging as a constitution of entangled agencies. PQI challenges the illusion of mastery in traditional research, where the researcher designs a study, collects data, and extracts meaning. Instead, PQI acknowledges that inquiry is an entangled, relational process, where the researcher, participants, materials, and concepts co-create knowledge in unpredictable ways (Barad, 2007). Consider a researcher studying movement and disability in adaptive sport. A conventional qualitative study might involve interviewing athletes about their experiences and analysing their narratives for themes. But a post-qualitative approach may examine the entanglements of bodies, adaptive equipment, and environmental conditions, focusing on how these elements intra-act to co-produce movement and performance (Giardina, 2017). The researcher might engage in moving-image inquiry (Manning & Massumi, 2014), sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015), or embodied writing (Markula, 2019) to explore how movement emerges through affective, material, and relational forces rather than

being reducible to individual experiences. This is a form of thinking with movement and (dis)ability, rather than merely representing or describing it (Markula, 2019).

One of the most challenging aspects of post-qualitative inquiry is that it refuses certainty. Traditional research is designed to produce clear, replicable findings; answers that can be measured, validated, and generalised. But PQI embraces the unknowability of the world, recognising that research does not reveal static truths but participates in the ongoing becoming of knowledge (MacLure, 2013). This becoming engages with the wider potential of both the researcher and the researched, unsettling what is traditionally included in the pursuit of clear and replicable findings. This unsettling unfolds as a dynamic interplay of thoughts, responses, and conceptualizations that resist linear conclusions. It moves towards affective intensities and emergent moments, what MacLure (2013) describes as ‘glowing moments’, where stories are narrated differently and knowledge is not simply represented but felt, sensed, and reconfigured. This requires a shift in researcher disposition and a willingness to embrace uncertainty, risk, and openness. Just as a navigator trusts the compass rather than the map, the post-qualitative researcher needs to trust the affective and material flows of inquiry and be willing to engage with uncertainty (Springgay & Truman, 2018). This is not a passive act, since it does not rush to closure, seeking easy interpretations that would reduce complexity. It is primarily a mode of sitting with discomfort, listening to the silences, and allowing research to surprise us. It means acknowledging that knowledge is never final, but always in motion (Lather, 2007). Putting away the map does not mean getting lost or undertaking a dangerous or reckless journey. Rather, it means learning to navigate differently.

WAYFINDING THROUGH THE BOOK

We did not intend for the chapters in this book to serve as definitive examples of post-qualitative inquiry. Rather, we invited authors to engage experimentally with its generative concepts, exploring the philosophical orientations and methodological provocations that animate this mode of research. As readers navigate through the chapters, they will encounter concepts that are widely recognised in academic research. Yet, when these concepts are activated through post-qualitative sensibilities and brought into relation with one another, they become sites of transformation. Thought is set in motion in ways that are speculative, metaphysical, and always contingent, unfolding in directions that cannot be predicted in advance. Concepts such as research methodology (Chapter 2), intimate scholarship (Chapter 3), research data (Chapter 4), language (Chapter 5), research assemblage (Chapter 6), arts-based methods (Chapter 7), discourse analysis (Chapter 8), deep purpose (Chapter 9), academic wonder (Chapter 10), emotions and feelings (Chapter 11), ethnography (Chapter 12), academic dialogue (Chapter 13), university teaching (Chapter 14), Indigenous knowledge (Chapter 15), and queer knowledge (Chapter 16) are not treated