From *After Method* to Care-ful Research

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In their introduction to this book[1] Camilla Addey and Nelli Piattoeva reflect on some of the themes that run through *After Method*. That book explored something that all social researchers know perfectly well: that in practice methods are never clean and tidy and that research perfection cannot be achieved. So the book bridged a gap between a prevalent style of research method moralising on the one hand, and down-to-earth stories about research conduct, mostly drawn from science and technology studies (STS) on the other. For more than thirty years STS had been watching how scientists work in practice and arguing that this had little to do with abstract rules about 'the scientific method'. Instead, they work by crafting practical and intellectual tools for knowing and handling particular, specialist, parts of the world. Those tools were, are, heterogeneous. Embodied skills, educated forms of perception, instruments for sensing, techniques for turning observations into numbers, protocols for coding up, combining and moving findings from one location to others, plus conventions about appropriate literary forms. All of these are embedded in equally necessary social and institutional arrangements, assumptions about authority, and power. The devil, STS added, lies in the detail which means that it is important to attend to specificities. If there are abstractions, then these do not exist, forgive me, in the abstract. Instead, they are crafted in specific places and practices, and they circulate through artfully created webs and networks. In short, as they distinguish between subjects and objects to generate locally warrantable truths, methods practices live in, draw on, and reproduce very specific and more or less costly conceptual, material, social and metaphysical hinterlands.

STS was not, is not, a unified discipline. Some of its practitioners assume that methods practices are tools for knowing pre-formed realities. Others (and this was the line ploughed in *After Method*) suggest that realities are performatively enacted in practices. If this is right, then since there are many different kinds of practices then there must presumably also be many different kinds of realities. Though doubtless realities and their practices overlap, what is real-ised varies from place to place. This suggestion is politically important. It not only tells us that other realities are possible, but also that to practise method is to enact particular realities and choke off others. It is (there is no choice) to engage in ontological politics. Ways of knowing including science cannot be, 'neutral', whatever that might mean. Instead, they order material, social and political realities. Implicitly if not explicitly (Haraway, 1989). As part of this they also reproduce particular metaphysical assumptions. (Western metaphysics usually assume that there is a single reality out there, a 'one-world world', and this assumption is embedded in most forms of scientific inquiry. An assumption that, it turns out, is far from universal, at least in non-Western cultures (Law, 2015).)

Twenty years on I do not think that there is much of this that I would recant. Indeed, in one way *After Method* was quite straightforward. It brought a well-established version of STS to bear reflexively on social science method. And since many were thinking in broadly the

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[1] Camilla Addey and Nelli Piattoeva (eds.), *Intimate accounts of researching education policy: the practice of methods*.

same way, the more open approach to method that it rehearsed was enthusiastically developed in a range of contexts including educational policy research. So, even though times have changed, I suggest that the basic message still holds up and remains relevant. Even so, it might be useful to think about what would sensibly be done differently now, given the passage of time.

A simple point first about 'mess.' The word is in the subtitle of the book ('Mess in Social Science Research'), and on the first page a caption to a deliberately disorderly graphic runs: 'If this is an awful mess …. then would something less messy make a mess of describing it?' This word, 'mess', has its merits but (I was warned about this at the time) it can be superficially misread. Indeed, sometimes this happened. I don't know whether I would stop using the term if I were starting out again, but it is worthwhile reiterating that good research, honest research, is not just messy. As the chapters in this volume show, it also takes time and effort and skilled crafting. It weaves its webs together, carefully and cautiously. In particular, it does its best to draw in and mesh its empirical, social, material and metaphysical hinterlands in ways that hold together, *pro tem*. Knowing, yes, that it is located, situated, and ultimately defeasible, 'messy research' is not the same as sloppy research.

Perhaps more important, I would attend more centrally to *why* we are doing research; to what it is *for*; and what it is *doing*. I would, that is, focus more on the *concerns* that run through and inform research practice; on the ways in which the performativity of research interfere and might better interfere in the orderings of the world (Haraway, 1992). In a paper published in the same year as *After Method* and writing in the context of the science wars, Bruno Latour (2004) worried that STS had become a tool for critique, for rubbishing science. Yes, it is the case that if knowledge is constructed, then social interests shape knowledge. Yes, there is no question that interested knowledge serving those in power needs to be called out. But, this was the core of his argument, by itself this is not enough. Put simply, this kind of criticism is too easy. Indeed, worse than this, it is dangerous. Yes, climate change science can be deconstructed. But do we really want to aid and abet this denial in a world in which power has cottoned on to deconstruction? So, and in the context of social science, Latour made a proposal. If we are criticising truths then we should, he said, commit ourselves to building up as well as tearing down. We should create and offer alternatives. He made his argument by talking about what he called 'matters of concern.' There are, as he noted, no facts out there lying around waiting to be collected and described. When we start working with facts it is because our research practices have actively helped to craft these into being, made them lively, sustained them, articulated them, and gathered them together. In short, they have been animated by and in the hinterland of research. The argument, then, is that facts cannot be separated from the concerns that run through our practices. And, though this was not Latour's main target, the

implication is that it would be wise to think hard about the character of those concerns. And this is the point that I want to press.

I said above that STS works through cases and specificities. So as I think about matters of concern I immediately think of an experiment in which Claire Waterton and Judith Tsouvalis (2015) orchestrated a long-term discussion about lake eutrophication and nutrient run-off in the English Lake District. This discussion was between activists, farmers, and environmental scientists. Sometimes the issues were highly charged. But, following Latour, the rule of the game was that while criticism was fine, this was always to be matched by constructive alternative proposals. As a result, over months of discussions the concerns and the realities of the participants slowly softened and changed, and new possibilities both in science and the policy emerged. So, and returning to *After Method* twenty years on, I would now explore the processes by which we might *educate research concerns*, our own, but also, if we are lucky, those involved in policy contexts – for, as the contributors to this volume show, the two are endlessly and reflexively intertwined. I would write about the practices and material forms in which we might collaboratively articulate, fine-tune, cultivate and revise concerns-and-their-realities in the light of unfolding research experience. I would worry, in short, about how we interfere.

What might this mean in practice? This is for discussion, but here are some thoughts. One, first off, I would press the wisdom of careful reading. Even (perhaps especially) of texts we do not much like. Of making ourselves vulnerable through reading by entering the worlds – the concerns – of other kinds of authors. Not just reading instrumentally. Two, I would spend more time exploring how we might do slow research in practice and thinking about how to find the time to attend to uncomfortable concerns – uncomfortable, that is, to us. As the editors and the contributors to this volume show, the problem is that we are embedded in endless institutional imperatives that encourage us – often force us – to engage in the means-ends productivist logic of quick research and quick publication. And this is particularly obvious in policy-related research where the imperative to be relevant and to 'do something' is usually very strong (Adams, Burke, & Whitmarsh, 2014). So if I were revisiting *After Method*, I'd be interested in reflecting on ways of breaking out of this logic for at least a period each week. Of making time for the rather undirected reading I mentioned above, but also for thinking, for instance, about practising an ethnography of patience – of mindful, attentive and not very goal-directed sitting and waiting, of being open to being blown off course (Pigg, 2013). Three, and this is something I also touched on in *After Method*, I would want to think more about the practicalities of holding open differences and awkwardnesses and tensions within research rather than glossing and smoothing them over. Indeed, like Waterton and Tsouvalis. Donna Haraway's (2016) phrase about 'staying with the trouble' beautifully catches the point. There is always trouble, and it would be wise not want to pretend otherwise. And four, I would think more about ways of articulating those tensions and discomforts – of making them explicit and putting them into

words. Of situating them within and beyond texts in ways that also avoid the traps of humanism (the editors of this volume are surely right that it is wise to avoid the idiom of confession.)

I now think of this collection of concerns and priorities as *care-ful research*. And here again I draw on recent STS thinking – this time about the character of care. This body of work attends, first, to the material heterogeneity of caring (machines feature in its stories, and inscriptions and gods and animals and bodies, and not just people). Second, it is necessarily modest because it knows that whatever it says is provisional. Third, it is careful to attend to small things. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) asks us to attend to whatever is easily neglected or overlooked (she talks of 'matters of care'), precisely because these are low status or do not fit the concerns of power. Fourth, she adds that it isn't very helpful to distinguish overmuch between cognition and emotion: care – and care-ful research – imply the need to cultivate both. (See (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015) on what this might mean for soil.) Fifth, and also important, is something I touched on above: the wisdom of cultivating a vivid awareness of tensions, multiplicities and difference.

So how to think about this? Annemarie Mol (2008) talks of the 'logic of care.' The model is medical. In the diabetes clinic there are no cures. Instead, there are irreducible tensions. Avoiding medical emergencies? Limiting long term medical harm? Living in ways that work socially and personally? These are concerns that are likely to tug in different directions. They change too, day by day. This means that any attempt to hold them together is iterative. There can be no formula. Instead, it is more like tinkering. And it is done collectively, in real time, by tinkering with shifting goods and bads (there are many kinds of actors involved, human and otherwise.) This, then, is a model for thinking about social research. Perfection is impossible, but care-ful research is sensitive to changing exigencies, concerns, tensions and forms of othering. It is, yes, uncomfortable. But it is slow, it is iterative, it is modest, and it tries to find ways of holding things together for a moment (Law & Lin, 2020).

The contributions to this volume tell us that this kind of care-ful research on policy making is alive and well. But, and in the entanglements between research and policy, they also encourage us to think about care-ful policy making (Gill, Singleton, & Waterton, 2017). This would be policy made slowly and collaboratively in ways that expose this to the vulnerabilities of tension and difference. It would be open about those tensions. It would seek to educate the concerns and the sensibilities that inform policy. It would work iteratively and recognise that any particular policy solution is both imperfect and necessarily provisional. Clearly this is continuing work in educational policy research. But the extent to which those who create policy themselves work in this way is clearly patchy. Forgive me if I end parochially, but in the patch I know best (England though not the UK), the preference is for centralised and top-down control. In health care this care-less-ness has been reflected in the how the covid crisis has been handled (Foundational Economy Collective, 2020). But just

as other knowledges and realities are possible, so too are other ways of making policy. And this is why the present book is so important.

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