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A conversation with Pat Armstrong about *Creative Teamwork: Developing Rapid Site-Switching Ethnography*¹

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In the spring of 2020, as long-term care homes in Canada became a focus of urgent attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, the main person called on to speak about these issues in the media and in public fora was Professor Pat Armstrong. A Distinguished Research Professor in Sociology at York University, Canada, and Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, Armstrong has vast experience in the fields of social policy, women, work and health. She has written numerous books and articles on these topics and has led many research grants, including a recent eight-year collaborative project, ‘Reimagining Long-Term Residential Care: An International Study of Promising Practices’ (2011–19).⁴ This project on long-term care (or nursing) homes was national and international in its scope and scale and was multi-disciplinary, multi-method, cross-generational and cross-sectoral (linking university researchers with non-profit organizations, trade unions, governments and community partners). The project’s team produced a wide range of publications and presentations for academic and public audiences, including the book *Creative Teamwork: Developing Rapid Site-Switching Ethnography* (Armstrong and Lowndes, 2018).⁵

This piece focuses on a conversation between Doucet and Armstrong about *Creative Teamwork* and its detailed account of ethical and relational team-based research practices. The book not only chronicles the development and application of a specific methodology that the team devised – that of rapid, site-switching ethnography – but it also addresses many of the key issues, tensions and rich theoretical, methodological, administrative and logistical opportunities that can arise in large team projects which span multiple disciplines, generations and years. As Armstrong (2018: 32) explains in the book’s Introduction, ‘the lessons we have learned are applicable to a wide range of approaches to research’. *Creative Teamwork* ‘is also about setting up and working in interdisciplinary, international teams as well as about sharing knowledge within and outside those teams. The book is particularly relevant for those proposing the kind

of interdisciplinary, international teams that have become an increasingly common way of doing research' (Armstrong and Lowndes, 2018: 16).

Doucet came to this book when she was developing a research proposal for a SSHRC Partnership grant for a seven-year project that embraced different disciplinary (and intra-discipline) approaches to theories, methodologies and epistemologies, which required a large multi-disciplinary team. Thinking about the potential epistemological challenges of team-based research, Doucet recalled a piece she had co-authored with her colleague, Natasha Mauthner, over a decade earlier, "Knowledge once divided can be hard to put together again": an epistemological critique of collaborative and team-based research practices'. They had written:

while theoretically qualitative social science research is rooted within a postfoundational epistemological paradigm, normative team-based research practices embody foundational principles. Team research relies on a division of labour that creates divisions and hierarchies of knowledge, particularly between researchers who gather embodied and contextual knowledge 'in the field' and those who produce textual knowledge 'in the office'. We argue that a theoretical commitment to a postfoundational epistemology demands that we translate this into concrete research practices that rely on concerted team-based relations rather than divisions of labour, and a reflexive research practice that strives to involve all team members in all aspects of knowledge construction processes. (Mauthner and Doucet, 2008: 971)

When Doucet's grant was funded, she returned to read *Creative Teamwork*. She was struck by how this particular approach to team-based research assuaged her earlier worries about intra-team hierarchies. This project, led by Armstrong, did not create divisions of labour between senior and junior researchers. Indeed, every part of the research was taken up by team members (sometimes by groups of up to 14 that included students and junior and senior scholars with differing levels and ranges of expertise on the questions being explored). As Armstrong (2018: 16) elaborated:

First, we conducted the research as a team and shared both the data and the analysis of the data. Second, we learned the lessons about methods and methodology together as the project developed, providing the basis for this collectively produced book. Third, we conceptualized the book as a team and, although individuals wrote each chapter, we held more than one workshop to reflect on each of them.

In *Creative Teamwork*, Armstrong and her team enacted and wrote about effective, ethical, and relational research practices. As project director and principal investigator for a grant that includes over fifty researchers, twenty-six non-university research partners and four countries, Doucet was excited about the possibilities for developing these in her own project. Wanting to learn even more, she approached Armstrong to have a conversation about *Creative Teamwork* with the aim of publishing a piece based on their discussion. Armstrong, keen to share the main lessons from the book, accepted. The pandemic made it impossible to meet in person, so the following

conversation took place through Zoom video and audio on 8 September 2020. It has been transcribed and edited for clarity and succinctness.

Armstrong and Doucet in conversation⁶

1. Questions of why and how

AD: Your book pulls the curtain back on the ordinary and extraordinary details of team research and its many relationship-building processes and shares how you navigated these processes. Academics rarely pay attention to the ‘how’ of research practices, which makes this book both refreshing and highly instructive. *Could you speak about how and why you developed the idea to write this book? Were there other books or resources that were useful as you carried out your team research? What do you hope other researchers will take from it?*

PA: Well, one reason we came to write it (and we didn’t set out with a plan to do this from the beginning of the project), is that we were all just so excited about the process and the team that we developed. We wanted to share that excitement and that feeling of really having participated together in an extraordinary learning process by doing this kind of method and working together in quite particular ways. I think something central to that was that we met in person, together, once a year.

But also, there is the very process of *doing* this kind of ethnography. Working very closely together over a week, you get to know people in a way that you don’t in most research grants. Our grant and its processes were unique in a number of ways. Virtually all the senior academics did the ethnographic work, including our emergency room doctor, our general practitioner (GP) doctor and our epidemiologist. They actually went in and spent the time. None of them had done that before, in spite of the fact that they’d all done research in this area. We’ve learned so much from and with each other through these exchanges. We really thought we needed to share it.

And in terms of your second question, is there anything else out there? No, I don’t know of anything else that talks about all of these aspects of the research project together—the process of creating a team, of working and reflecting together, or just the mechanics of setting up the management of your data and figuring it out. When you’re doing a project, for instance, with a small group of people working on a particular site, how should you share that data? With everybody or just with them? We had to constantly figure out those kinds of questions as we were going through this together. So, I think all those things contributed to us wanting to write this book.

AD: *How did you facilitate working together? How did you get people to commit to it?*

PA: It was really important to have monthly seminars where we learned things like how to think through writing together. We did, and learned a whole lot of things together. We read ethnographies and learned, for example, how to go into a home where everyone is hearing impaired. Everyone was a big support to me when I needed to think through logistics. And students were fully part of that throughout. In my experience, it’s much more common, especially for senior academics, to send the students out to do the work.

AD: Yes, exactly.

PA: Which is not what happened here. We learn from them, too. You know, there’s a chapter in the book written by the students. They were part of the seminars; they were an integral part of the research teams. I think that they felt fully part of the

team, with the same work. And we all stayed in the same accommodations. I've been to team meetings where the students stay in the university residence and the faculty stays in the hotel. We made sure that there were always students working together on and with the team.

Another thing we had to work out, of course, was language. In Norway, and Sweden, many spoke English, but in Canada, one home had a lot of the residents who only spoke French. Initially, in Germany, we tried to use formal paid translators, but that didn't work because they didn't understand the context or the issues. So, we turned to local students to help us with translating.

We learned so much through the translation process. For example, I did an interview with our Norwegian partner. Like most Norwegians, she spoke English. But she wanted to respond to my questions in Norwegian because she was being recorded and she wanted to ensure that she was expressing her thoughts accurately. Our translator would give me an instant translation and, every once in a while, the interviewee would say, "No, no, that's not exactly what I meant".

AD: *Can you say a little bit more about your monthly seminars?*

PA: The ethnographic team seminars were always combined with what we called our monthly coordinating committee meeting. The local people all usually came in person – the people from York University (in Toronto) and Trent University (in Peterborough, about 140 km away). Anyone else could join electronically.

AD: *And you would use the opportunity to address a substantive theme? That's a very interesting way to work.*

PA: We were learning together, right? We also did that in our big annual meetings. We had a workshop for the public and another kind of learning workshop for us. For instance, Eric Mykhalovskiy, an expert in institutional ethnography, gave a team workshop on ethnography and observation. Then Jim Struthers, a historian, did one with us in the archives on doing archival work. So, we learned together, and we reflected together on everything and it was really quite exciting to do that.

AD: So, once a month. That's a commitment.

PA: It is. And I think everybody enjoyed it. The first book, *Troubling Care*, came out of our first seminar series, with people writing papers. We also spent time at the monthly meetings figuring out things like authorship.

AD: *With my new team research project, we were able to prepare for some of these authorship and collaboration issues beforehand, but only, really, because of your book.*

PA: I'm delighted. And that's, of course, why we wanted to write it. We just wanted to share the excitement. You can see that excitement, for example, in the chapter that [Jackie Choiniere and Jim Struthers \(2018\)](#) wrote together from very different disciplinary perspectives (Chapter 7, 'Different eyes: an RN/sociologist and an historian invite you on a tour of our fieldnotes').

AD: *What do you hope other researchers will take from Creative Teamwork?*

PA: I think it is very different from anything that's out there. In so much university-based research you're supposed to learn things, like how to set up a team, by osmosis. So many of us just stumble through it without any guidance. So, that's one part of it.

The other part is that we worked so hard to be democratic and reflective together, doing this kind of team ethnography. We would make a guide about each geographical area where we worked to tell the whole team about the local amenities. And I always insisted that we include the local liquor store because when you work on a shift

together, you can decompress and share a drink. That togetherness makes such a difference because you've all seen and heard so much.

2. Rapid site-switching ethnographies and 'flash ethnographies'

AD: You developed a very intriguing methodology: rapid, site-switching ethnography, rooted in the long traditions of ethnographic research, case study research, feminist methodologies and feminist political economy. You also invented the term 'flash ethnographies', which were shorter, day-long site visits to nursing homes, that complemented to full, week-long site visits to each research site.

As you write in your book, rapid site-switching ethnographies, much like other ethnographic methods, 'involves interviews, participant observation, document review and focus groups' and 'it means attending to those who do the work or experience the care as authentic sources of knowledge'. Further you write:

Rather than one researcher conducting fieldwork over an extended period of time, however, our data collection involved at least two researchers together on a given shift at a given location within the home in order to facilitate reflexive analysis as well as more data collection. They were part of a team of 12 to 14 that did the ethnography together in each care home. Fieldwork was conducted over a short period of time, with document review and pre-interviews done in advance of entering the field [...] We added the term 'site-switching' to indicate that we were using the same approach across countries, with teams made up of members from many countries. This allowed us to compare across countries while we were conducting the ethnography and encouraged a questioning of what might otherwise be invisible to or taken for granted by a researcher familiar with the jurisdiction.

We found this site visit, along with the discussion before and after, enormously fruitful and decided that we should, along with each full, week-long site visit, conduct a shorter, day-long one in each jurisdiction. We invented a new term for these visits, calling them 'flash' ethnographies. (Armstrong and Armstrong, 2018: 12–13)

Can you elaborate on how rapid site-switching ethnographies and flash ethnographies could be used in other kinds of research?

PA: It really was about developing it collectively because we didn't have much of a model. At one of our early meetings, we had that whole session about doing ethnography. About half of us had done ethnographic work and the other half were very new to it. We were at Baycrest in Toronto, a huge long-term care facility, and the entire team spent the day there together, maybe twenty-seven researchers and at least a dozen students (depending on the site). We had introductions from the home, we observed, we talked to people, and we met back with the managers to ask them questions. We did all kinds of things. We had learned an enormous amount in just one day at Baycrest, like what kind of background information is needed before a site visit; then we came back together the next day to discuss strategy and set-up. One day is generally not enough, but you can't afford to have a team stay two weeks at each site. Each team only stayed two weeks in a whole country or in an area. Baycrest was very sympathetic to our project because it's a research institute as well,

and we actually had a collaborator from Baycrest who helped us (because they are an organization that includes a research unit).

So, we decided to stay over a week in every place first. That way we would be knowledgeable enough to have an effective follow-up one-day *flash* visit with a group of up to fourteen of us working together all day rather than in teams and in shifts. We just thought, 'Let's try it out here,' after the Baycrest experience.

AD: That's very interesting. *Could you see that being adapted for other projects? In community sites or family sites?*

PA: Well, I think it is a very special approach. You need to have places that are big enough that a large team can kind of blend in. It's not very adaptable to small organizations. However, you could take smaller groups into community centre organizations or schools. Australia has been following this strategy and so have some Norwegian projects. Our organizations were big enough for a big team, but we were still working in pairs all the time. We would only ever have one pair working in one unit, for instance, of a long-term care home.

AD: *So, the pairs interviewed together and also analysed together? Or was the analysis done with the larger team?*

PA: Well, it wasn't such a neat division. There would be two shifts going in at seven o'clock, and we would work in teams of two. But the shifts overlapped. Often, there was a central room where we got the tape recorders and handed in the informed consent forms, and where we shared what we'd heard and seen and learned. So, the analysis was rarely restricted to two people. It was almost always collective. And it was good for validating things. You'd go back to this room and someone would say, 'I was just told that they're only allowed one diaper. Can somebody else checked that out?' We did that kind of thing all the time. Jim tells the story in the book about these memory boxes they would put outside of residents' rooms. He was taking a picture of one, and a family member came along and raged at him, even though we only ever use the pictures for our own purposes. He was quite upset by that. So, those of us who were not on a shift sat around and talked about how to deal with that, how to think it through in a way that feels comfortable.

3. Relationalities and relationships in research processes

AD: Relationalities and relationships permeate every aspect of your team project: theory building; team integration; methodological decision making; ethnographic fieldwork (team and group interviews, photo-voice and participant observation); the intertwining of method, theory, and logistical and ethical issues in conducting research; administrative matters; writing and sharing fieldnotes; cross-generational mentoring and relationship building with students; building cross-sectoral relationships for knowledge mobilization and knowledge products; facilitating relations between all team members, managers at field sites and research participants; and ensuring that relationships continue to be nurtured after the project ends.

I know that relationships are supposed to be central in projects, but some projects do not work that way, and the relationship part can end up being isolated from other aspects. How did you manage this?

PA: I certainly agree. I have been in large projects where the research gets isolated and also where the focus is on publishing. I was determined that this project was not going to be like that, so all of the structures were designed to build relationships.

Face-to-face meetings, which I know are so hard to do right now and are kind of going out of style, are so important. And it's absolutely essential that they have some kind of learning-together trip or fun-together thing to do built into them. We danced, we made up skits, we did all kinds of things that we planned right from the beginning. At every meeting we had music and all kinds of things to make it a social event. You have to work at it. People see things differently because they come from different places and have different levels of comfort, especially with going to a long-term care facility. But I think it helped to have a number of senior academics who were really interested in doing primary research and who aren't competitive, not only because they don't need another publication but also because they had long histories of working democratically for change. For junior academics, there's often that enormous pressure to publish something of their own. We certainly had some tensions, but we tried to address them. We tried to work through them.

And as I said earlier, living in the same place, experiencing quite emotional interactions together helps to build strong relationships. Being prepared to listen to each other, to really focus on building relationships ought to be at the core of a team.

Trust is one of the reasons we were able to produce so much – something like three hundred presentations and publications in total. Because we built the trust, we could write together, analyze together. You could say to someone, 'No, I think that that's wrong.' We're writing this new grant application now, with half of the people from the original team, and we write back and forth and say to someone 'No, you can't use that here because this or that,' without having to be worried they'll feel rejected.

AD: *Your team resisted team divisions of labour and research. Again, this is not the norm in a lot of large team-based projects. How did you come to work that way?*

PA: I think it was really important that there were people prepared to move out of their comfort zones. In terms of doing research, it was so different to actually be in a long-term care home. Having enough senior people that could kind of be relaxed, not focused on 'publish or perish', was also very important. We made it very clear when we invited people to the project that it was a team project.

And right at the beginning, we had conversations about students and authorship and how we would order names. We used that to talk about how we were all part of the team – there wasn't a hierarchy and nobody's work was more valuable than another's. Some of us had worked on collective projects or had been involved in community organizations, so that helped. We reinforced it in structural ways, too: students don't get different accommodations than faculty, everybody does their own fieldnotes, transcripts are done by a paid transcriber, not the students. Those kinds of things were quite important.

4. Temporalities and spatialities

AD: In addition to relationality, temporality and spatiality both seem quite central to your project. *Can you talk about how time, space, and relationships interacted throughout the research process? And what were some of the most productive and challenging aspects of this?*

PA: You certainly need time to build relationships across six different countries. And the fact that we had seven years (and finally ten years) of funding really made it possible to spend some time working the way we worked. If we'd had to start doing ethnographies with a three-year grant, we wouldn't have been able to do anything like we did. We wouldn't have been able to do the same kind of planning.

That time was really important for doing this kind of research and having this kind of team. To have that amount of time and that amount of money to be able to dream, if you will. That larger seven-year time period was absolutely crucial. So was spending the time over a week together at sites. And also spending four days together for our annual meetings. We figured that we should do most of our meetings here, in Toronto, where the largest number of people on the team live, so we could save money in terms of travel. But we also met once in Norway. We wouldn't just fly in for a two-day visit for our annual meetings. We'd spread it over four days and do these quite different things that I described earlier.

5. What happens afterwards?

AD: In the final chapter of the book, you lay out issues related to legacy (that is, new research projects and proposals that emerge from the project, and sharing the team bibliography, confidential fieldnotes and data). *What was the process of coming to these decisions? Were they made by the full group or by the steering committee? Were there tensions or disagreements? If so, surrounding what issues? How did you have that conversation, especially when this is something people don't really talk about?*

PA: Well, we talked about it. I mean, we were so busy and engaged during the project, it was hard to think about these things. On the other hand, I think we have an agreement for where the data will be stored.

We have a project that's halfway through, 'Unpaid Care in Public Places', by a smaller group from within the team project. And an offshoot project that has a different focus but involves a lot of people who met through our project. There's the Norwegian project, too, which is going strong. And we're putting in two new grant applications. So, there are a lot of offshoots going ahead and then, as you know, we were supposed to have a grand wrap-up event.

When we couldn't have it, I thought, 'Well, what we need to do is to write a report in relation to COVID.' So, we wrote the end-of-project paper, which I just intended to send out to all of the people that we had invited to this grand event. But, when one of our community connections (the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives) got it, they said 'We want to publish this,' and they put it on their website. So, it got a lot of attention, and it's been picked up in other ways. I've done, I don't know, thirty interviews or webinars based on it.

AD: It must be very satisfying to know that the work is making a difference. It's getting out there and nurturing a whole new generation.

PA: Well, yes. And we did build in feedback throughout. At the end of every site visit, we met with the managers and the union of each long-term care home and said, 'This is what we think we saw and heard.' And we told them negative things as well as positive things. We would then write them a written report, and often went back to report directly to them.

In Norway, we went back to the places where we had done site visits and talked to them about our research and gave them the bookettes.⁷ So, we built in that kind of constant feedback, which was also what our workshops were about. It's not just the product – the report – that's been getting so much attention, but these connections. We worked hard to present an exchange and develop relationships. Our partners were very engaged with us, especially the non-profit employers and organizations and four of the five unions, but those were relationships we built up over years and

years. I don't know what you'd do if you had a brand-new partner and you don't know each other. I've worked on projects like that before, and the partnership is kind of bogus because you've got to have the trust there, especially if you're working with organizations that don't usually work with academics.

6. Key Lessons

AD: In the final chapter of this book, 'Threading the strands', you write that:

These are only some of the critical lessons we learned. We made mistakes and learned from many of them, in part because we were building a team and were committed both to teamwork and to continuous learning. We would do some things differently if we started again. However, we did build a creative team that produced important policy and academic work. And we constructed a new variation of a methodology in the process. We hope these lessons are useful to others who do research, whatever their methodology, the size of their funding, or the number of people in their teams. (Armstrong, 2018: 180)

What would you do differently if you were starting again? What other advice would you give to new team-based projects?

PA: Don't try and do it during a pandemic.

All of the lessons we have learned, most of the things we did right, they're partly a result of years of experience. I'd tell people to read the book. And to talk about all these important issues. The key lessons we learned are there. I'm hoping the book means that people don't have to start from scratch when they're setting up team projects.

Notes

¹ *Creative teamwork: Developing rapid site-switching ethnography* is coedited by Pat Armstrong and Ruth Lowndes.

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⁴ Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

⁵ In addition to *Creative teamwork*, this project produced three further books: Armstrong and Braedley (2013); Armstrong and Day (2017) and Armstrong and Armstrong (2019).

⁶ The interview was transcribed with transcription software. The transcript was edited by Jessica Falk and this article was edited by Elizabeth Paradis.

⁷ Short reports shared online for both academic and wider audiences; for an overview of bookettes, see Baines and Gnanayutham (2018, chapter 11).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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