Exploring and Expanding on Pluralism in Qualitative Research in Psychology

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Psychology has only recently seen the acceptance of qualitative research within the mainstream of its research (Willig & Stainton-Rogers 2008) and has recognised the ending of the “paradigm wars” (Oakley 1999) with the acceptance of mixed method qualitative-quantitative research. Recognition of the silos of mono-theoretical and mono-methodological approaches that can arise from early research training and application has led to warnings against “methodolatry” (Curt 1994), where the method risks becoming more important than the topic under inquiry, creeping into qualitative research (Willig & Stainton-Rogers 2008). In the last few years the emergence of pluralism in qualitative research in psychology has led to its increased use in empirical and theoretical applications.

Although calls for the employment of theoretical and methodological pluralism to pursue understanding of human interaction with the world and to gain further insight to the complexity of lived experience have been made in the field of psychology for some time (e.g., Fiske & Shweder 1986; Howard 1983), developments have trailed behind other social sciences (cf. Denzin 1978). The establishment of pragmatic approaches to research (e.g., Barker & Pistrang 2005; Cornish & Gillespie 2009; Onguewuebuzi & Leech 2005), bricolage (e.g., Kincheloe 2001, 2005), and pluralistic frameworks for counselling and psychotherapy (Cooper & McLeod 2011) illustrate some applications of the call.

However, the employment of more than one qualitative approach to accessing meanings within the same piece of research is relatively uncommon. While a number of theoretical and methodological anthologies both within psychology (e.g., Willig 2001) and beyond, especially in applied areas of research (John 1998; Morgan 1997), offer multiple methodologies for analysing the social world and our experiences therein, such frameworks are often put forward as alternatives between which the researcher has to choose. As such, it would appear that calls for theoretical triangulation involving “the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data” (cf. Patton 1987, p. 60, drawing on Norman Denzin’s early work 1978) have, on the whole, not been heeded. Where such theoretical
and methodological experimentations have taken place, they have been used constructively to study complexities of human experience (e.g., Johnson, Burrows & Williamson 2004). Such pluralistic approaches have been found to be valuable in exploring topics of particular ontological challenge (e.g., paranormal experience; Steffen & Coyle 2010). Researchers have focussed on the role of pluralism in triangulation (Moran-Ellis et al. 2006) and in multiple data sources in seeking further understanding of a phenomenon (e.g., Dicks, Soyinka & Coffey 2006).

Yet heeding the calls for both theoretical and methodological triangulation is becoming increasingly necessary, especially in qualitative research where combining qualitative research approaches is limited. People’s experiences are multidimensional. The worlds that we inhabit are much more multiontological (Mark 2006) than a single theory and method allow us to appreciate. Our actions, feelings, and thoughts intersect with issues of power, identity, meaning-making practices and interpretation, and practical, material challenges, all at the same time. As such, a framework of ontological and epistemological multiplicity and multidimensionality would be both appropriate and helpful in understanding such a reality. This means engaging with different logical operators in selecting our theoretical and methodological frameworks and moving from a conjunction of “either, or” to a conjunction of “both, and.” As such, a study on motherhood (to use the example that launched our own forage into pluralism) would not be a choice between a focus on either identity or issues of power or a choice of either a narrative approach or a discursive one. Instead it would be a study that looked at both identity and issues of power, as well as the ways in which meaning around both is constructed and everyday life negotiated (thus drawing on a range of analytical approaches such as narrative and discourse analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis as well as perhaps grounded theory).

Our interest in combining qualitative research methods in a single study arose out of questions about the role and impact that different methodologies might have on our understanding of the experiences of women becoming mothers to a second child (Frost 2009). We asked how the creative tensions arising out of epistemological and ontological incoherence can help to highlight gaps and contradictions in the data gathered through semi-structured interviews with the women. We were interested also in the ways in which the findings from different analyses might be brought together as “collective findings” and the validity that such findings would have. This led to questions about the ways in which multiple researchers brought multiple engagements with data to the research process and why this was important in accessing and interpreting meaning within it (see Frost et al. 2010 for further detail). Our findings highlighted the level of agreement amongst findings made by different researchers working separately (Frost et al., 2011; see also King et al. 2008) and the ways in which researchers differed in their verbal and written presentation of the findings (Frost et al. 2010) to contribute to multilayering of perspectives that led to a more holistic insight to the ways in which the experience are described. The value of pluralistic approaches to us seems to be in the opportunity they offer to tap into the various dimensions of individual experiences that does not limit the narrator to being a phenomenological, realist, or postmodern subject alone but might instead be understood as combination of ontological positions.

The interest generated by the application of pluralism to data analysis is illustrated in a series of well-attended symposia hosted at Birkbeck University of London by the PQR team (March 2008, May 2008) and in the development of an international network (N-PQR, www.npqr.wordpress.com). The response to the Call for Papers for this Special Issue was impressive and represented researchers in psychology from Europe,
North America, and Australasia. Through N-PQR we have been contacted by people on issues ranging from questions about resourcing pluralistic approaches to defending the use of multiple ontological and epistemological stances in data analysis, to its role and value in the evaluation of psychological practice. This special issue contains exemplars of the pluralistic practice and theory behind many of these issues.

All the articles collected in this special issue attend to the different aspects of multiplicity than pluralism implies. An article on movement in youth identity from Katsiaficas, Futch, Fine, and Sirin draws on verbal and visual data to show how pluralistic methods have the potential to capture movement across time and space. With the assumption that young people construct hyphenated selves in everyday circumstances within shifting social and political contexts, this article uses a pluralistic analytical approach to “allow hyphenated selves to be heard and interpreted in a way that neither pathologizes contradiction nor privileges coherence but presents a skillfully woven narrative about the self” (p. 120).

Lazard, Capdevila, and Roberts offer an article that uses research into the management of prolific and other priority offenders to highlight the value of Q methodology as a conceptual framework and analytic procedure for studying social problems and related solutions, in particular those that are managed by a range of stakeholders. The authors highlight the uneasy fit that Q methodology has between quantitative and qualitative approaches to research. Its epistemological “impurity” renders it marginalised from both approaches. The article illustrates how the permeability of the boundaries of Q methodology and its ability to “talk” to other methods means that it can focus on subjectivity and commonalities in pattern analytics with a grounding in hypothetico deductivism. The authors argue that Q methodology has similarities in theoretical and analytical conceptualisations with many other methods commonly placed within the qualitative tradition.

A third practical application of pluralism is seen in the article contributed by Chamberlain, Cain, Sheridan, and Dupuis. These authors use multiple methods of data collection to reflexively demonstrate their experiences of the processes of working pluralistically. They use research aimed to gain insight into how women who have lost a significant amount of weight maintain that weight loss and to explore the everyday clothing practices of larger women. They show how the demands of the pluralistic approach to research can be outweighed by the extension of the scope and depth of the data, the enhanced reflexivity that it forces, and the intensification of the relationship between researchers and participants that is achieved.

An article from Goodbody and Burns raises questions about how critical theory endangers multiperspectivity and the project of pluralism by imposing a master narrative that forges a unitary view of reality. In response to these challenges, they call for more critical reflexivity and “epistemological anarchism” (Feyerabend 1975) and highlight the added value of richness, integration, and capacity brought by pluralist methodologies.

Two articles further highlight ways in which an openness to pluralism can aid data integration (Robinson) and enable further insights (Scharff). Using a study on retirement, Robinson presents relational analysis as a way of exploring further the possible relationships between analytical themes within data. The author suggests that this approach helps to promote a more integrated and connected qualitative analysis. Scharff draws together discourse analysis with Butler’s performativity theory engaging with the possibilities and limitations of both approaches. She uses the literature in cultural psychoanalysis to move her analysis forward and, in doing so, her article highlights how placing various bodies of literature in dialogue might construct a useful pluralist methodological framework for analysis.
Between them this set of exciting papers provides practical and theoretical insight to the challenges, benefits, and limitations of conducting pluralistic research and encourages us to consider the relevance of this approach to a range of topics. The articles invite us to think about the ways in which combined ontological and epistemological positions work to minimise imposition of truth on reality by the researcher at the same time as challenging us to think through the implications of this controversial stance.

We believe that the outcome is a thoughtful consideration of the place that pluralism can take on the stage of qualitative research in psychology.

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References


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