A Disquisition on Pluralism in Qualitative Methods: The Troublesome Case of a Critical Narrative Analysis

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This article uses a research example as a case study of qualitative pluralism in practice to analyse issues involved. The case was a critical narrative analysis of interview data about clinical psychologists’ Personal and Professional Development (PPD). The rationale for a pluralist methodology to address critical research questions is described. To examine participants’ PPD in terms of the relationship between individual subjectivities, group identities and societal power relations, elements of IPA, Grounded Theory, DA, and critical deconstruction were combined within a narrative methodology.

The pluralist project of multiperspectivity was endangered by the use of critical theory to impose interdependency between methods/levels of analysis. Philosophical errors disrupting the logic of justifiable conclusions were possible. More rigorous, critical reflexivity and thoughtfulness about “epistemological anarchism” (Feyerabend 1975) are needed. Added value (richness, integration, and capacity to consider more interesting and important research questions) nonetheless makes the case for pluralist methodologies strong in the context of research as wider social activity.

Keywords: clinical psychology; diversity; epistemology; identity; narrative; ontology; pluralism; professional development; qualitative methods

Introduction

“A scientist who wishes to maximise the empirical content of the views he (sic) holds and who wants to understand them as clearly as he possibly can must therefore introduce other views; that is, he must adopt a pluralistic methodology. . . . Knowledge so conceived is not a series of self-consistent theories that converges towards an ideal view; it is not a gradual approach to the truth. It is rather an ever increasing ocean of mutually incompatible (and perhaps even incommensurable) alternatives, each single theory, each fairy tale, each myth that is part of the collection forcing the others into greater articulation and all of them contributing, via this process of competition, to the development of our consciousness.” (Feyerabend 1975, p. 30)

The purpose of this article is to critically evaluate the knowledge that can be derived from a case example of pluralist qualitative research practice, and to examine epistemological and ontological issues underlying the challenges, problems, and benefits of the approach.
This will be achieved through first presenting and then discussing a pluralist qualitative research case example. The case example is the first author’s (Goodbody) doctoral research on personal and professional development (PPD) and majority-minority relations in clinical psychologists in the United Kingdom. We were interested in the operation of ideology and power in experiences of PPD of clinical psychologists who have different social and historical relationships to psychology’s dominant discourses. Therefore, the aim of the research was, within a critical psychology frame, to investigate PPD for clinical psychologists by focussing on personal, professional, and social identity positions and knowledges and the relationships between them, including how professional knowledge may mediate personal and social identities.

In this article, the term pluralism will be understood and used to convey philosophical positions emphasizing diversity and multiplicity over homogeneity and unity (Bielfeldt 2003). This is a perspective that can be juxtaposed in distinction to methodologism in psychology and, we would argue, our disciplinary tendency to give preference to “following preset procedures” (Ponterotto 2011, p. 398) rather than developing approaches to systematic inquiry that may help us address significant research questions in pursuit of the social justice perspective that has been called the “fifth force” in psychology (Lyons et al. 2010, cited in Ponterotto 2011). Thus, Denzin (2010, p. 271) likens the critical qualitative researcher to a “jack of all trades” who produces a “bricolage” (Yardley 2008) through deployment of a variety of methods to “perform(s) different versions of reality.”

We will examine the status of such a bricolage and the truth claims that can be made from the resulting mosaic of realities with reference to the research practice example. Therefore, in the first part, the PPD research, its knowledge and practice contexts, and the rationale for its pluralist qualitative design will be described. This description provides the “data” on which the second part, the exploration of issues of pluralism, will be based. Thus, the reader may develop his/her own considerations.

The main research questions we sought to address in the PPD research were:

1. How and what do clinical psychologists communicate about the nature of their experiences of PPD and the significant learning processes involved?
2. How do minority and majority (in terms of gender and ethnicity) clinical psychologists construct and navigate the developmental relationship underpinning PPD between their personal and professional identities?
3. What stories of the person, in his/her lifeworld, in the profession, and in the wider world, are told by psychologists, and how do power, identity, and culture manifest themselves in these narratives?

Questions such as these at the interface between social and individual psychological processes pose methodological challenges. A cluster of methods was developed in response, which we refer to as a critical narrative analysis. It involved making the researchers’ critical theory standpoint the highest context marker, forming an explicit continuity weaving together the range of narrative methods selected. We position this idiosyncratic clustering as one justifiable way, but not the only way, of conducting a critical narrative analysis (e.g., Emerson and Frosh [2004] have articulated another, distinctive critical narrative analytic technique informed by psychoanalytic sensibilities). It represents a configuration of methods and epistemic standpoint which we argue was particularly relevant to our research questions, topic of inquiry and ideological commitments. The question of whether, as a methodological stance, our version of a critical narrative analysis was more pluralist or more integrative (and the consequences for knowledge production) is one of the issues we
examine, along with other issues such as whether and how pluralism, postmodernism, and critical theory can work together.

**Case Study: Researching Personal and Professional Development**

**Personal and Professional Contexts**

Both authors are involved in training clinical psychologists for the National Health Service (NHS). Burns is a joint doctoral programme director with responsibilities contextualised by the profession’s commitment to increasing the diversity and cultural competence of its workforce (e.g., British Psychological Society 2004; Cape et al. 2008; Williams, Turpin & Hardy 2006), an area closely related to PPD. Goodbody organises the curriculum area of PPD in the training programme. A key challenge is how to facilitate critical and significant learning about difference, inequalities, and the personal/social nexus for young adults whose personal and professional subjectivities have largely been constituted by dominance relations characteristic of mainstream UK society. The profession is peopled in the majority by White middle class women similar to Goodbody herself.

Personal accounts and research (e.g., Adetimole, Afuape & Vara 2005; Msebele 2008; Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney & Hau 2006; Simpson 2004; Watson 2006) indicate that the experiences of some minorities in professions (e.g., counselling, psychotherapy, academe) can be marginalising, distressing, and personally difficult. Despite efforts to diversify the profession, an unrepresentative demographic profile for clinical psychologists (e.g., Cape et al. 2008) persists. Thus, in 2009 only 15% of successful applicants were men, and only 11% were from Black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds (Clearing House for Postgraduate Courses in Clinical Psychology 2009). Therefore, we were interested in PPD in practice as representing the interstices of individual and social processes of learning, development, and membership, and a potential site for the replication or refutation of wider social inequalities. Next, we will outline some of the theoretical, political, and practice issues relevant to doing research about PPD.

**Contexts of Knowledge and Practice: The Discursive Frames**

“Personal and professional development” is a distinct term and concept that started to appear regularly in clinical psychology professional discourses from about the early 1980s. Its insertion into the professional qualification criteria produced by the British Psychological Society can be seen as an attempt by some practitioners to “put the person back into the professional,” in recognition of the fundamentally relational nature of the professional role. This was at a time of early technologisation of knowledge and practice, arising in part from the scientist-practitioner discourse on which clinical psychology’s recognition, status, and power in academia and in the NHS was being built. Early versions of PPD were linked with concerns about the stresses and effects of the personal nature of the working relationship on both practitioners and clients, but particularly about psychologists’ need for self care and support to ensure safe and healthy practices (e.g., Cushway & Tyler 1996; Walsh & Cormack 1994). Subsequent to becoming an institutionalised professional practice, the discourse of PPD has shifted more in the direction of personal resilience, with a greater emphasis on clinical psychologists’ reflexive responsibilities for self-awareness (personal and cultural) in how they relate to and influence others (people who use services, colleagues, systems) in terms of ethics, difference, identities, and roles.
So what does PPD currently mean in practice in the professional documentation and social practices of the clinical psychology? It is constructed as a set of competencies such as understanding ethical issues, power imbalances, diversity, and the impact of one’s own value base, managing limits of competence, and using supervision to reflect on practice (Committee on Training in Clinical Psychology 2008). Competencies such as these are requirements for registration to practice (e.g., “be able to practise in a nondiscriminatory manner”; Health Professions Council 2010). In our doctoral clinical psychology programme, the developmental curriculum strand called Personal and Professional Development includes units on Risk and Ethics, Difference, Diversity and Social Inequalities, Professional Roles and Identity, and extensive facilitated experiential learning through Reflective Practitioner Groups that occur fortnightly across the three years of training. Finally, PPD has been recognised at a national policy level as important for the quality of health services delivered by professionals (e.g., Department of Health 2004, 2005).

Whilst different to PPD, the broader literature on professional development has some useful conceptual material to offer. Professional development is usually understood as acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to perform a particular professional role. Some authors suggest that professional identity is superordinate to other identities (Adams, Hean, Sturgis & Macleod Clark 2006), whilst others note that it usually requires a negotiation of tension between agency (the personal dimension) and structure (the socially required role) (Coldron & Smith 1999, cited in Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop 2004). It is this second perspective that resonated with our experiences, personal and professional, of what may be important and interesting in the development of clinical psychologists.

These more dynamic or dialectical aspects of PPD are privileged in the clinical psychology literature seeking to conceptualise the processes involved in the practices required by regulatory and professional bodies. Thus Walsh and Scaife (1998) described PPD in clinical psychology as “the process of developing understanding of the relationship between one’s own life history and clinical work” (p. 21). Gillmer and Marckus (2003) claimed PPD involves developing “a capacity to reflect critically and systematically on the work-self interface. . . directed towards fostering personal awareness and resilience” (p. 23). Hughes (2009) proposed an heuristic characterised by overlapping domains of self-in-context: Self/Self in Relation/Self in Community/Self in Role at Work. We would argue that White’s (1997) social constructionist contention that personal experience-based knowledge is subordinated to socially legitimated professional knowledge in order to maintain power relations necessitates a further domain of “Self in Society.” This would be concordant with Tamboukou’s (2008) more critical stance whereby PPD may be seen to reflect “the interface of public and private narratives. . . An antagonistic field of power/knowledge relations at play” (p. 104).

However, there is limited empirical research about how PPD happens or what it looks like. Notable exceptions in related areas include Rønnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) research showing integration of personal characteristics and learning from individual life experiences into (mainly White) psychotherapists’ practice over the life course, and Costello’s (2005) study which indicated a critical and problematic tension between the social status of personal identities for ethnic and social class minorities, their professional identity development, and academic progression.

PPD can be seen as one of the dominant discourses involved in constructing the training, practice, and regulation of clinical psychologists. Whilst empirical research is sorely lacking, a broader body of professional and conceptual literature is available which
informed the research questions we asked about power and identity relations in the development of clinical psychologists.

**Epistemic and Ideological Standpoint**

A critical theory perspective provides a way of problematising understandings related to its concerns with social transformation and emancipation, that is, change. Parker (1999) said, “We do not discover psychology but live it and produce it. What we critical psychologists want to include in psychology are the various ways in which men and women of different cultures and classes construct and reflect upon action and experience”. He went on to state that, “the systematic examination of how some varieties of psychological action and experience are privileged over others, how dominant accounts of ‘psychology’ operate ideologically and in the service of power” (p. 13) are distinguishing characteristics of critical psychology. This quotation implies both an ethnomethodological perspective with its emphasis on knowledge produced through people’s practices in their lifeworlds and a social justice aspiration, which is where we situated our theoretical and practical research commitments about PPD. These commitments were reflected in our questions about the experiences and narrative practices of clinical psychologists in intersecting minority and majority relationships (present, historical, cultural) relative to the ideologies and power relations represented by the dominant discourses of PPD in the profession.

**Research Procedures**

Ethical approval was granted by Canterbury Christ Church University.

**The Sample**

Participants were recruited by advertisements circulated via clinical psychology e-mail lists, at professional conferences and meetings, including those concerned with “race” and culture, and by word of mouth. Exclusion criteria included being trained outside the United Kingdom or qualified for less than two or more than 10 years, and being from a White ethnic group other than British. The sampling aims were:

1. to ensure that participants had relatively common socialisation to PPD and a postqualification period of development whilst still being involved predominantly in clinical rather than senior management practice
2. to provide a purposive set of cases covering intersections of minority and majority ethnic and gender identities
3. to include psychologists from ethnic minority backgrounds representing common groups who historically have immigrated and settled in the United Kingdom and could be said to embody visible differences relative to the ethnic majority.

Ten clinical psychologists took part in the research: two were White British men, four were White British women, and four women defined themselves as British Black African, Caribbean, or Asian. All participants had grown up in the United Kingdom though one had spent part of her childhood abroad. One White and one Black woman regarded themselves as having working class origins, and one man and one woman spoke of being gay.

No minority ethnic men who met the inclusion criteria were recruited in the time available, although we used an extended range of strategies including snowballing and contacting heads of clinical psychology in many NHS Trusts in London and the South East.
This was disappointing, and whilst the first stage of the analysis involved individual narrative case study and therefore a representative sample as such was not needed, it did clearly limit diversity and counterpoint between cases and thus the power and particularity of subsequent analyses. Statistically however, it is not so surprising: in 2008, 72 men were offered clinical psychology training places out of a total of 535 places in the United Kingdom, of which only six were from Black and Asian backgrounds. These kinds of proportions have been stable over a number of years. However, other (ethnic minority) researchers have had more success. For instance, Paul (2009) reported superordinate Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) themes for ethnic minority men’s experiences of being clinical psychologists of “both feet in minority camps” and “square peg in a round hole,” experiences which could have contributed barriers to participation in research conducted by a female ethnic majority clinical psychologist representing a training institution. As a result of this problem with the sample, a Black male clinical psychology colleague was invited to act as consultant at the analysis stage so that a different gender/ethnicity standpoint could be brought to the thinking.

About half of the participants indirectly knew and were known by Goodbody due to the relatively small and highly networked nature of the clinical psychology community. Two participants supervised training placements, another had trained several years ago on the programme Goodbody worked on, and another was familiar from occasional regional meetings. Therefore, existing professional relationships, reputations, and identities were sometimes part of the mix forming the interview context.

**Interviews**

Participants were interviewed by Goodbody using a semi-structured schedule of questions derived from the literature and from her experience. They lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, were digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were sent to participants who could comment on accuracy or exclude material if they wished. No one did this.

Narrative interviews often consist of a small number of questions, the purpose of which is to act as an invitation to speak and to elicit narratives with minimal intervention by the neutral researcher. However, we did not expect clear, formed narratives about PPD to be readily available to participants, since it is not a discrete event or process in the same way as common narrative topics such as illness or an intimate relationship. Nor is it a topic that participants were likely to be familiar with verbalising as a story. Furthermore our critical frame of reference at times required a degree of specific questioning, inquiring into normalised or silent areas of participants’ narratives (for instance, about the part played by gender in the person’s PPD if this was not raised). Therefore, the interview was conducted through asking about a number of topics relevant to personal and professional development. The interview opened by asking about the person’s current working context followed by a general question about life pathway to becoming a clinical psychologist. Other topic areas covered included how PPD was understood by the participant, key learning incidents, and dilemmas in developmental or identity experiences, which were inquired into opportunistically, often using a deconstructive questioning style, whilst following the interests of the participant. The interview and resulting narrative was seen as a co-construction between researcher and participant produced within a social and temporal context (Kvale 1996).

In telling stories about themselves in relation to others as part of their PPD narratives, the positioning of the researcher by participants was also seen as a source of information. In some cases, it seemed that the researcher (Goodbody) was afforded a position akin to that
of an outsider-witness in a definitional ceremony (White 2000), who was given the power to provide a validation of experience on behalf of a community (professional, ethnic, or gendered). One woman said she consented to participate because she wanted knowledge of ethnic minority experiences to reach a wider audience, appointing the researcher as an advocate for voices it was felt would otherwise not be heard. Others created a relational identity position of the researcher as collaborator in tacit knowledge of certain kinds of lived experience.

**Ontology and Reflexivity**

Methodology was seen as a socially situated set of epistemological practices representing particular cultural perspectives on what is valued knowledge. Truth was not seen as created by method. As will be apparent from the previous section, the PPD research was closest to a relativist perspective by virtue of its critical frame and a consistent relativising of meanings through reference to their contexts and means of production. This was not an elaborated stance at the time of conducting the research, and problems with this ontological position for pluralist research will be examined later.

Both relativist and intersubjective approaches place particularly high demands on research reflexivity and transparency. Reflexivity can be seen as an epistemic practice that in itself structures and organises knowledge but at the same time, should extend and perturb the researcher’s horizons. The kind of critical social reflexivity argued for strongly by Chinn (2007), Day (1993), and Heron (1995), going beyond the intrapersonal and confessional, was clearly required for the present research, along with “analytic reflexivity” (Stanley 2004) between the text and researcher. In addition, Butler (2005) has contended that self-knowledge is a function of social relations; therefore, no full transparency is possible, but the responsible self knows the limits of its own knowing. These considerations led to a pluralism of reflexive practices in the PPD research including creative methods (e.g., experimental writing), dialogue and feedback from a variety of sources (including specific consultations) in addition to usual diary methods for instance. These practices will be referred to more fully in the course of describing how the research was conducted.

**Methodological Challenges**

To examine how clinical psychologists represented their PPD in relation to construction of their personal and social identities and minority/majority status in the profession, a qualitative approach was suitable to generate data on their subjective experiences and how they made sense of those experiences through their activities of construction and representation. Yet as power is central to understanding minority-majority relations and their influence, the methodology had also to be able to interrogate the workings of power in relation to subjectivities, including that of the researcher. A principal challenge of the PPD research was therefore to develop a method that would give leverage on questions which aimed to inquire into relationships between individuality, macro social processes and researcher standpoint.

A concomitant challenge was to identify a methodology that was epistemologically and ontologically consistent with this aim. Conventional good practice claims that for research to be meaningful and accountable, its epistemological foundations and its methods should be clearly identified and congruent (Darlaston-Jones 2007). There should also be coherence with the ontological positioning of participants, in this case, our positioning of them as embodied relational agents feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that are both constitutive of and constituted by their particular social worlds.
We were interested in:

- the subjectivities of psychologists and the content of what they said about their experiences of identities and PPD in the profession
- psychologists’ discursive practices and how they were used to achieve particular rhetorical ends, particularly in respect of identities and relationships
- the discursive constitution of PPD, the ways of being and subjectivities afforded by psychologists’ discursive positionings, and their psychological and social effects
- the recursive and reciprocal relationships between levels of analysis and what these may say about PPD and the operations of power in the profession
- building on and developing theoretical propositions in the literature through systematic, generative and reflexive contact with research data.

Critical theory is not linked to any one particular methodology and can be applied at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis (Reeves 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, within a given qualitative method, there is often epistemological latitude (e.g., realist and social constructionist versions of IPA and Grounded Theory). IPA could have been relevant in terms of understanding the psychological phenomena underlying experiences of PPD, but it is not designed for the systematic examination of the relationships between social processes and individual consciousness (Willig 2008). Being a principally phenomenological method, IPA is premised upon a natural ontology assuming that behind the folds of hermeneutics, we can nonetheless look through a window onto psychological entities the character of which are largely independent of circumstance and historical-cultural process. In contrast, Discourse Analysis (DA) had potential for developing understandings of the workings of ideologies and power relations but would offer less about the complexities of the person as an actor in his/her life (Emerson & Frosh 2004), and along with more discursive psychology approaches, could risk “reducing the psychological subject to a series of positions in discourses . . . .” (Holloway 1994, p. 542).

On their own, none of the common methods offered an opportunity to investigate multiple levels and versions of realities within a relational framework. They also involve a fundamental decontextualisation in their assumptions and analytic procedures whereby themes and patterns are separated from the individual case in order to be interpreted across a sample (Starks & Trinidad 2007), reflecting the concern with universalising knowledge characteristic of Western psychological research. Therefore, in order to try to “avoid the perils of both individualistic and social reductionism that have plagued the human social sciences for generations” (Tappan 2005, p. 50) and to maintain an idiographic and holistic perspective, a narrative methodological frame was adopted, encompassing elements of other methods.

Narrative methods can be adapted to the theoretical perspectives of the research (e.g., DA of narratives, Horton-Salway 2001). They have the potential, in some forms, to represent the individual as an intentional agent whose subjectivity, experience, and actions are shaped by the constraints and opportunities of the social world, that is, as an agent operating within structures in a relationship of what we would describe as emergent reciprocal in/determinism. They can “provide ways to understand the interactions that occur between individuals, groups and societies” (Plummer 1995) and honour “the complex conversation between sociocultural influences and the profoundly personal interpretation of our experiences out of which we create a distinctive life course” (Shapiro 1998, p. 92). Thus narrative methods appeared to provide the framework we sought “to retain the complexity of . . . individual lives . . . , and to investigate multiple interactions among individuals and cultures” (Kirkman 2002, p. 30).
Critical Review: Identity, Narrative Approaches and Contested Pluralism

The concept of narrative has become pervasive in the social sciences, psychology, and psychotherapy. It is interdisciplinary, slippery, unruly, rich, and sometimes indigestible, characterised by diversity, differing levels of analysis, and contrasting philosophical assumptions. It eschews methodological proceduralism: narrative methods are not “a set of disciplining practices” (Riessman 2008, p. 18). Narrative is “variously used as an epistemology, a methodological perspective, an antidote to positivist research, a communication mode, a supra-genre, a text type ...” (Georgakopoulou 2006), a “portmanteau term” and a “theoretical bricolage” (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou 2008, pp. 2, 4). Kirkman (2002) argued that it is impossible “to draw clear boundaries around narrative as data, narrative as method, and narrative as theory” (p. 30). It has been seen as a mode of thought or “root metaphor” (Sarbin 1986) distinct from the scientific mode (Bruner 1990) and traditional paradigmatic reasoning. Therefore, we argue that at the level of approach (Burnham 1992), narrative is best seen as an organising principle shaping the research process, its conception, practice, and analysis. At the level of method, however, it can be variously constituted so that analysis and interpretation can be conducted from differing theoretical and epistemological perspectives.

However, there is a divergence in the literature about plurality of methods. Riessman (2008) describes narrative research methods as a family of types that share overlapping similarities and differences and are sometimes in conflict with one another: these include thematic analysis (with primary interest in content and semantics), structural analysis (structure and syntax), and dialogic/performative analysis (context and social grammar). She encourages adaptation, innovation and crossing of boundaries between methods. In contrast to this permissive pragmatism, Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2008) argue that there are fundamental problems in mixing narrative methods that are logically incommensurable due to “theoretical fault lines” (p. 3) and historical contradictions.

These contradictions are located in the difference between narrative work using life stories and case studies based on the humanist tradition of person-centred, unitary identities, and developments premised upon a postmodern ontology of multiple, contradictory subjectivities and the social production of narratives shaped by power relations. Conceptually central to PPD research, identity is both narrative theory’s most conducive and most contested subject. The philosophical tensions illuminate issues in methodological pluralism more generally and are, therefore, worthy of closer consideration.

Murray (2003) cites McAdams (1985): “An individual’s story has the power to tie together past, present and future ... to provide unity and purpose. Identity transformation – identity crisis, identity change – is story revision ... Identity is a life story.” In this mode, narrative is an expression of individual experience and internal representations of phenomena, structured temporally and given meaning through the creation of self-understanding, which are simply reflected in language. It sits easily within mainstream individualistic psychology (e.g., Bruner 1987; McAdams 1996). Thus a story serves a number of functions for the individual, including an autoepistemological one whereby in telling about the self, so the sense of self is developed and known (Mancuso 1983). The individual actor is motivated and free to create his or her own meanings of self in life through narrative. In this way, narrative can be said to be central to the (Western) ontological project of individual human existence.

However, Horton-Salway (2001) citing Edwards (1997), proposed three ways of looking at narrative identities. The first way can be described as “based on a realist ontology” (Murray 2000) whereby narrative is a reflection of an independent reality, the internal
nature of the individual. In the second, the narrator creates cognitive constructions of that reality. Both types assume correspondence between the narrative and the inner experience and cognitive processes of the narrator, with language being understood as a representation of the person as a phenomenon. These assumptions characterise narrative psychology. Discursive psychology (e.g., Potter & Wetherall 1995), on the other hand, does not assume equivalence between language and inner experience. Rather, language is social action, a tool through which certain social tasks may be accomplished, and “meaning is use” (Wittgenstein 1968). This is the third way of looking at narrative identity through which the self is not revealed by narrative but is accomplished performatively in relation to actual, represented, and imagined audiences: narrative becomes a purposive tool for “doing” identity as part of the local social grammar and temporal context, situated but ever-changing.

This brings forward both new challenges and resources in narrative research. For instance, the interview becomes a co-constructive research method (Kvale 1996; Mishler 1986) invoking the plurivocal nature of text (Bakhtin 1981). Also, the role of researcher reflexivity in authoring knowledge through the interpretation and representation of people’s narratives moves from periphery towards centre. In this narrative research mode, we start to look at the endless free-floating universe of signification and representations, and the flickering ciphers that are post modern selves and ways of knowing.

By examining identity in narrative research, one of the constructs central to the PPD research, it can be seen that rather than offering a solution to how to inquire into the complexity, particularity and interactivity of people’s subjectivities and social lives, narrative methods simply mirror the ontological and epistemological issues invoked by mixing qualitative methods more generally. On the one hand, we are cautioned against potential methodological incoherence (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou 2008) and as a logical consequence, the questionable status of conclusions that can then be drawn. On the other hand, narrative research methods are held up by Riessman (2008) as rich with the promise of the creative pragmatism of innovation and boundary crossing that might enable us to pose and address significant psychosocial questions.

We decided to follow the path of transgression and risk in the hope of added value.

Methods Used in the PPD Case Study: “From Recipes to Adventures” (Willig 2008)

“. . . narrative researchers may be likened to chefs who see cooking as an art form and who do not try to stay true to traditional recipes” (Fraser 2004). The methods used for the PPD research in this spirit of experimentation will now be described briefly before going on to evaluate the outcomes.

We drew from the diverse range of narrative methods to make a composite design that could reflect the individual — social dimensions of the research questions (for instance, drawing on an individual/group approach (Aranda 2001), the analytic phases and connections between individual and social elements of narratives (Fraser 2004), the voice-centred relational method (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch 2003), and the communication model of narrative research interviewing (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2000). In doing this, Goodbody was seeking to experiment with “curdling” (Abbey & Falmagne 2008) methods (as distinct from blending).

The aim was to produce a protocol to govern the analysis of the interview data. In practice, it consisted of a list of detailed questions which were used systematically to
interrogate the interview transcripts of each participant psychologist. However, accompanying the protocol-driven approach were other important but messier aspects of the process of analysing rich qualitative data. These were researcher practices drawing on personal creativity, imagination, and reflexivity of the kind that Speedy (2008) has so eloquently described as part of her immersion in narrative data. So the familiar practices of repeated readings, extensive use of highlighter pens, cutting and pasting, reflective annotations of the text, and supervision were extended into diagrams and pictures trying to explore the shape, development and character of a person’s narrative, discussion in the first author’s personal therapy of personal resonances, reactions and stuckness, fleeting associations (for instance to genres, themes, or characters in literature) on endless scraps of paper, and the like.

The protocol list of questions was broadly organised by four levels of analysis of narratives, corresponding to Murray’s (2000) personal, interpersonal, positional, and ideological levels. In the sections that follow, a description of the approach to data interrogation is provided to illustrate the workings of the method. The description is complemented by some examples of how the analytic questions were applied and what they produced.

The Personal Level: The Individual Narrative

We first sought to understand each psychologist’s narrative individually, idiosyncratically, and holistically as an aspect of a life story. This larger whole was then used as a purposive context for interpreting the meaning of specific content or episodes (c.f. the hermeneutic circle).

Examples of protocol questions:

- What is the main narrative — how can the participant’s communication be represented as a story?
- What are the meta- or cultural narratives within the individual one?
- How do parts, episodes, small stories, and phases contribute to the whole?
- What do metaphors, images, variable language use, shifts in tenses, emotional expression, changes in speech delivery suggest?

These aspects of the analysis bore most similarity to the humanistic type of narrative psychology method in which versions of self are authored in the telling and understood as a function largely of the individual. We summarised an overall unique narrative for each participant, using a blend of participant’s and researcher’s words. For instance:

_P’s overall narrative was like that of a hopeful and liberatory journey, almost a quest. Psychology was the departure point leading away from his family and personal past towards new understandings, senses of belonging and difference. Initial zeal for his mission as a professional was tempered with realism through the flux of experience and particularly, the contest for authority between psychiatry and psychology, from which considerable personal and professional learning flowed. His current job, in which he saw himself as being part of the professional priesthood, afforded him opportunities for developing preferred identities in relation to disciplinary powers._

This is an extract from a more extensive Individual Summary Analysis of a narrative. Copies of these summaries were sent to all participants for their comments and reflections.
The Interpersonal Level: Dialogicality and Performativity

In this aspect of the analysis, narratives were seen as communications occurring within the local social grammar of the research context. Therefore interviews were positioned as co-constructed (cf. Kvale 1996) and the communicative actions between researcher and participant were seen as data. Within a Bakhtinian view of language and dialogics (e.g., Pollard 2008), the addressee and his/her actual or imagined identities are understood to be in the speaker’s mind, shaping the intentionality of the communication, and meaning is seen as produced through the primacy of context relative to text.

Examples of protocol questions:

- How did the participant enact identities and PPD competencies in relation to the researcher as a particular (actual, symbolic and imagined) audience for their narrative?
- How did the participant relate to the researcher and how did the researcher’s contexts, history, and beliefs affect the way she responded? How did this affect the way the interview was conducted; for instance, was there anything the researcher held back from asking?
- How did we manage similarities and differences between us?
- How did the above considerations shape the narrative produced?

The ways that relationality was constructed by both parties and reflections on these by the researcher formed layers in the narrative data that provided experiential perspectives on self/other identities and dialogicality within power relations. To illustrate this, it was noted that a couple of minority ethnic participants tended to make an effort to explain, interpret, or emphasise cultural meanings in their stories that they may have thought would be unfamiliar to Goodbody as a member of the ethnic majority. The White men did not do this about gender, nor was it apparent the White women’s talk which was often characterised by collaborative relational moves was premised upon assumptions about shared tacit knowledge. However, the language of psychology was used by all participants with the researcher to provide a lingua franca between us and a sign of identity held in common.

Murray (2000) claimed that “the challenge is to connect explanations across the different levels” (p. 343). Therefore, understandings of the personal narrative and the interpersonal process that produced it (i.e., the first two levels) had primacy in that they became the frame of meaning for subsequent readings of the text and interpretation at the third and fourth levels.

The Positional Level: Social Positioning

Positioning “is the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (Davies & Harré 1999, p. 37). Raggatt (2007) classified different domains of positioning through which the internal and external worlds interact: “. . . personal positioning reflects how people construct and narrate their own lives in a moral framework, social positioning reflects the force of cultural and institutional prescriptions that define and limit the boundaries of the self (e.g., class, status)” (p. 359).

The aim of this level’s analytic focus was to understanding “the dynamics of positioning among voices” (Raggatt 2007, p. 356) by examining the dialogical organisation of discourse within narratives. For instance, the ways in which self (“I”) was positioned
by the narrator in relation to others (“They”) and researcher (“Thou”) were seen as pro-
viding information about agency and the construction of personal identities and power relations in the participant’s social world (Harré & Van Langenhove 1999; Hermans 2002). This relational pronoun grammar that constructed participants’ narratives, is represented in Figure 1.

The “I – Thou” side of the triangle indicates the Level 2 Interpersonal focus, but the researcher is also an audience for the relations constructed in the narrative between the participant and a variety of others. The “I – They” side of the triangle in Figure 1 is the principal focus of the positional level, though overall, all sides of the triangle work simultaneously together and in relation to one another.

Examples of protocol questions:

- What conversations are there between different voices (e.g., personal, professional), and how are social relations represented in the voices in the narrative?
- Are there any substories involving dramatisation of voices that are critiques of voice-relations? Any use of mimicry, appropriation, or ventriloquisation?
- What I-positions are created through the relational positioning of others, and what is achieved in terms of agency and morality in performed identities as a result?
- How were voices warranted and given authority?

As an emphatic illustrative substory, a BME woman produced an extreme parody of upper class speech and used expressions such as “la-di-da” in an enactment of an extended dialogue showing the researcher how White staff responded to her suggestion that they should play some games at the office Christmas party. This represented a transgression of their cultural norms for what people should do (sit and talk) and should not do on such occasions. The ridiculing of White middle class professionals and their one-dimensional culture (to a White middle class professional) could be seen as authorising the moral identity of the “I” narrator and her power to experience, be hurt by but resist the dominant social culture.

**The Ideological Level: Discourse and Power**

Clearly, there is considerable overlap between levels and this was of course partly the inten-
tion of the bricolage of narrative methods. However, at the ideological level, the principal aim was illuminate the workings of power in participants’ narratives and subjectivities and,
in particular, to excavate marginalised, ahistorical, or contested stories by asking questions of the narratives drawn from Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Tamboukou 2008), narrative therapy (White & Epston 1990), and the deconstructionist perspectives of feminist and postcolonial theories. The latter involve the destabilisation and reanalysis of category systems that are discursively constituted as given or natural, so that the standpoint on representations of reality is displaced from the centre of power. There is also overlap between the ideological and positional levels of analysis, just as there is between the two forms of discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell 1995). Thus a subject position in a discourse has consequences for subjectivity and social effects: it locates the person “within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire” (Davies & Harré 1999, p. 35).

Examples of protocol questions:

- What were the stories of power (in/exclusion, resistance, and accommodation)?
- What was privileged, made visible, taken-for-granted, obscured?
- How was gender, class, ethnicity, etc., given power by the narrator and how was its power curtailed?
- How were dominant discourses related to?
- What subject positions were thereby constituted and contested?

The ideological lens was used to focus on material such as that in the following extract, to produce a consideration of the in/visibility of Blackness. The participant was talking about a key learning moment during training:

> And she [tutor] was the first person to ask me about my race and culture and the kind of, if there are any issues arising from that in terms of my placement. And I remember being slightly bewildered and not really knowing what she was talking about (laughs), um, because I had spent most of my life just trying to fit in because being brought up in a very White town, I just wanted to be like everyone else. And ‘I’m like . . . Black? Me? No no no. I’m just like everyone else!’

This participant emailed the following reflection after reading her Individual Summary Analysis:

> I was particularly interested in the themes around ‘becoming a black woman’ and i liked the questions you generated with a view to deconstructing a comment i made – ‘I’m like . . . black? Me? No no no. I’m just like everyone else!’ This is something I have recently been talking about with my partner, we were talking about how I felt I needed to ‘over compensate’ for being black in the town I grew up. It seems that I felt the need to prove myself and somehow be better than others, as a way of overcoming negative stereotyping due to my race. I do wonder if my ‘work hard’ values are a similar attempt at over compensation – possibly a defensive strategy against being seen as a lazy and useless (black) psychologist.

**Further Group Analyses**

The Individual Summary Analyses became the second level data set from which a group analysis was produced. It was achieved through each summary being subjected to constant comparison with every other summary. This was done qualitatively and cumulatively as
each individual analysis was generated and also post hoc, through the formal systematic compilation of similarity-difference tables organising key analytic themes between and across participants. This meant that the integrity of each unique narrative case analysis was preserved because the analytic themes were generated ideographically but then put in relationship with all others to facilitate examination of patterning and polyphony of voice. In addition, an experimental creative voice-relational account (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch 2003) based on this group analysis was produced which put participants’ voices in conversation with one another about the emergent issues of identity and power in PPD narratives. For purposes of transparent reflexivity, Goodbody included her own voice in this dialogical piece.

PPD Research Results

It is not our purpose to present the results in detail for discussion but rather to provide enough material for the reader to be able to form views on the products and effects of the pluralist research practices that have been described. (Goodbody and Burns [2011] provide a fuller account of results of the analysis of power relations.) Below are some examples of summary findings in order to illustrate the kinds of knowledge conclusions that were drawn and to aid evaluation of the approach.

Sample of Summary Results: Narratives of PPD, Identities and Power

*Commonalities.* All or most narratives were constructed as journey, passage or growth and relied for their plot and development on “struggle” (more marked for BME narratives). A key temporal dimension of the narratives was about increasing awareness of psychology’s limitations as a knowledge system and increasing authorisation to draw on self and diverse forms of knowledge in the professional role. Dominant narrative strands within the journey narratives included escaping from or resolution of childhood issues by developing as a clinical psychologist (six mixed participants), in combination with either lifespan development (five White participants) or the challenges of being Black in a White world (three BME participants).

Likewise, all or most participants narrated PPD as overlap or integration within zones of proximal development between their personal selves and their professional roles and as making sense of that relationship and its recursivity. Reflective practice and supportive but challenging relationships were crucial and central to this project for all participants. Resilience and self-care, boundaries, learning to understand and manage personal emotional reactions, and the impact of work on the self were the key PPD content areas. Impact of the personal self on others in professional practice relationships was not commonly emphasised.

*Differences: Intersections of Gender, Ethnicity and Class in the Minority-Majority Relational Context.* BME women’s narratives of development were described as “minority-individual-in-society” narratives. They were largely built on stories of raced and gendered difference and conflicting personal/social and professional identities. Their life experiences as socially devalued minorities were not well accommodated by dominant discourses of PPD, and they often drew on counter-discourses and PPD practices outside mainstream psychology to contest negative positioning and to construct preferred identities (e.g., social constructionism, systemic theory). Their agency was principally expressed through resistance of discrimination and seemed to operate within a set of dominance
power relations. BME psychologists (and a gay White man) also tended to utilise a repertoire of narrative and discursive strategies to construct multiple social identity positions enabling them to act fairly fluidly across professional and personal cultures. This appeared to be a strategy to counteract what was experienced as forceful positioning as devalued Other.

White participants’ narratives were mostly indicative of participation in power relations that afforded greater possibilities for freedom and agency, and were described as “individual-in-the-lifespan” narratives. Difference was constituted with reference to individuality, personality, and phases of life. PPD in clinical psychology functioned well as a humanist discursive resource with which to speak their lived experience through a largely self-defining “I” born of stable, context-independent and essential constructions of identity.

White participants appeared to live in a largely de-raced and ungendered world, and tended to become markedly less articulate when asked to speak about personal gender, ethnicity and PPD. The gender blindness of the White women participants suggested that being in a majority conferred pseudo-dominance. However, whilst a prevailing congruence of personal and professional identities emerged from White narratives, there were some noteworthy conflictual exceptions (e.g., motherhood and career, (low) social class and (lack of) entitlement).

In spite of being in a minority in the professional, the White men’s narratives and PPD were not inscribed by minority issues, indicating that their wider social gender status was portable and of a higher order. Fatherhood was presented by one man as an experience contributing to building his confidence and professional authority. Both men’s agency was evidenced in terms of valued difference from others (e.g., robustness, not following the crowd).

Multiple identities overlapped, amplified and contradicted one another in diverse ways in the participants’ discourses of development. Thus experiences of mental health stigma and racism compounded one another for one participant, whereas gay or lesbian sexuality as a positive “out” identity did not function in this way. It seemed as though valued majority identities could sometimes attenuate the effects of stigmatised ones, though Whiteness had little effect in mediating social class.

These results suggest therefore that mainstream clinical psychology’s version of PPD offers greater affordances for professional development to members of socially dominant groups. PPD as discoursed in psychology can be seen as a technology of the self that perpetuates the interests and power/knowledge base of the discipline, through being constitutive of subjectivities for all groups. However, it fails to encompass some of the key social experiences in the development of members of subordinate groups who tend to resist its regulatory influence.

**Discussion and Evaluation**

In this section we address some of the issues involved in adopting a pluralist qualitative methodology. In the dissertation, Goodbody appraised the research in relation to some common criteria for quality assurance of qualitative research (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie 1999; Mays & Pope 2000), and she received feedback from the examiners’ perspectives. The issues identified through this process were helpful in clarifying some of the knowledge claims that could or could not be made from the research. One of the most obvious problems was the lack of any BME men in the sample. For present purposes, we will select a couple of issues from the quality evaluation process to examine in detail and will focus upon the criterion of “owning one’s own perspective” (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie 1999).
because of the strong relevance this has for qualitative pluralism and for reflexivity in particular.

Through the evaluation and examination process, personal and epistemological positionings were deemed quite transparent and reflexivity was generally incorporated in clear, varied and accountable ways, making it possible for the “consumer” of the research to form his or her own judgements about the part that personal and social perspectives may have played in the production of particular understandings. However, is transparency and saying where you are “coming from” enough? We will now argue that privileging critical psychology theory as an executive standpoint organising the research needed deeper examination in order to evaluate how it functioned within a pluralist design. First, we will consider some of the philosophical issues in pluralism.

**Ontologies of Pluralism: Multiple Methods but How Many Realities?**

If pluralism of qualitative methods is seen as based on a postmodern ontology, the social world is assumed to consist of multiple, fragmented, and conflicting realities and the ways of seeing and knowing that construct them. This could be regarded as a “meta-ontology,” for within it lies the possibility for diverse ontologies (e.g., realist and relativist assumptions about the nature of being and reality) to sit alongside and jostle together whilst still be considered valid both in their own terms and as part of the postmodern melée. Thus a realist IPA perspective on PPD would construct a certain kind of reality about something called PPD, and radical relativist discursive psychology research into PPD would create a different kind of knowledge claim. The epistemological-ontological distinction is blurred such that our ways of knowing specify the nature of what is known. Multiple reality perspectives could conflict, be inconsistent or converge but would not compete for truth status (philosophically that is, if not in social practice) because there is no single or organised reality independent of methods of inquiry. This state of affairs could be likened to political pluralism whereby the balance of power is held between multiple interest groups. The effect of adding in critical theory is to politicise social problems “by situating them in historical and cultural contexts, to implicate themselves in the process of collecting and analyzing data, and to relativize their findings” (Lindlof & Taylor 2002, p. 52).

Before going on to consider a realist pluralist ontology, it is necessary to examine some of the problems of relativism relevant to the role of critical theory in the PPD research. The relativisation of interpretations of data (i.e., situating them relative to time, place, person, and researcher) is a distinguishing feature of discursive and deconstructive methods characteristic of critical inquiry, and of the PPD research. However, Parker argues that “the fact that we can relativize phenomena does not mean that all explanations or moral positions are equally valid or equally useless” (1997, p. 295). What is at stake here is pivotal: the relationship between truth and ethics in a relativist universe. Teo (2005) sees morality as misguided universalism, an incongruent feature in philosophical postmodernity. However, we would argue that positioning morality or a social justice perspective as a high order of context in pluralist research is a way of changing the “epistemic privilege” (Bat-Ami Bar On 1993) on truths within a relativist ontology without making any claims about reality. Within systemic theory (e.g., the Coordinated Management of Meaning or CMM; Pearce & Pearce 2000) this would be considered an aesthetic move which accorded meaning and accountabilities to research through inserting the ethical context as a dimension for e/valuation of truth claims. Thereby, “the good life” becomes a domain of interest in thinking about qualitative pluralism. (However, this was not the move made by Parker (1997), who instead appealed to a critical realist ontology to arbitrate value and oppose the conservative forces of relativism in truth production in critical psychology.)
There is also a realist pluralist ontology. In this version, multiple methods are chosen to capture or access the plural nature of different facets of reality. The assumption about reality is that it has different qualities constituting its nature which do exist independently of our ways of knowing them. The trick is to find the right tools for the job to investigate these qualities, and these tools may then be used to triangulate reality. Mathison (1988) said that there is a predominant assumption that variety of methods will “lead to a singular proposition about the phenomenon being studied” (p. 13), but that this is usually not the case in practice. Furthermore, there may be greater value in using triangulation to explore differences. She goes on to argue that the researcher must make sense of the different perspectives, resulting in richer understandings, greater holism, and increased validity. She does not say how this might be achieved, but clearly transparency about theory and reflexivity would be primary in the process.

The postmodern version might be considered a permissive and relatively unproblematic “take” on qualitative pluralism, except for being dangerously close to a radical relativist, “anything goes” approach rendering appraisal of quality and value difficult. Likewise, provisos about transparency aside, the realist idea of “methodological triangulation” (Denzin 1978) with the researcher making sense of multiple perspectives has its own plausibility. Whatever their respective merits, arguably, it is important when thinking about the relationships between plural methods and their knowledge products to know which ontology research is based upon. So which ontology did the PPD research inhabit? This question is posed a posteriori and was not addressed in planning the PPD research. However, we will argue that the use of critical theory as the overall lens of interest and interpretation is problematic in both.

Critical Theory and Qualitative Pluralism

For the PPD research a methodological approach was constructed to match the ontological assumption that there were multiple and connecting levels of reality that are personal, interpersonal, positional, and ideological. This ontological assumption was not surfaced so that its implications could be considered explicitly at the time of the research. Nor were the discursive consequences of structuring reality in terms of these levels or the integrity of the relationship between the nature of reality and its categorisation in this way examined. With respect to methodological triangulation, the analysis sought not so much to examine the different knowledges produced by different methods at each level, but by means of critical theory, to consider how they related. The purpose of focussing upon connections between levels was to derive knowledge that was greater-than-the-sum-of-the-parts concerning how interactions between levels of analysis worked together as a functional system, and thus explore the recursively constituted nature of the individual-society dialogue. Therefore, neither postmodern nor realist ontological assumptions were met, and the researcher (Goodbody) probably did carry a “phantom image” (Mathison 1988, p. 17) of being able to derive a singular proposition. Explanatory pluralism does not assume interdependence or mutuality of the entities subsumed in different levels of description.

So can the PPD research still be considered an example of pluralism of either kind, or is it something different, an attempted integration based on a coherence theory of truth? If the PPD research were to be seen as more akin to integration, then all the problems of bringing together the divergent and conflictual philosophical assumptions underlying different methods would reconfigure themselves and rise up to challenge the logical validity of conclusions that could drawn from such a composite methodology.
The privileging of critical psychology (and Foucauldian ideas of recursivity between individual subjectivities and the operations of power in particular) as the theoretical basis for functional relationships between different methods creates problems for the pluralist project in a number of ways. First, critical psychology could be considered as belonging to the domain of grand theory, totalising discourse and master narrative, providing a monist ontological explanation of the social world, at odds with the local and particular concerns and claims of a narrative approach and the pluralism of a postmodern ontology.

Second, it could be argued that using critical psychology to thread philosophical consistency among questions, methods, and analytic products (i.e., results) creates ways of knowing that are as tautological as they are coherent. Therefore, critical psychology could be seen as not only running counter to the multiperspectivism of the pluralistic project, but also ensuring the researcher sees what she looks for, restricting methodological doubt and important opportunities for surprise, indeterminacy, and difference regarding other possible “realities” that might otherwise vie with or stand in contestation to the critical worldview. In the PPD research, by synthesising multiple methods and using them within a dominant theory narrative, their dialectic function was at least impaired, and the epistemic pluralism of different methods was minimised.

Third, the foregoing arguments raise a fundamental question about whether research reflexivity can function usefully in critically informed qualitative research if attention and curiosity are circumscribed by the frame of concern of the grand theory and its a priori monist conceptual interests. The question could be asked whether reflexivity has a role at all as we have now in effect argued that by positioning critical theory as having the “God’s eye view” of a unitary and certain social reality, a methodology was created that was tantamount to a modernist closed system of inquiry.

A Different Evaluation Perspective for Pluralist Research

From the perspective of clinical psychology, an applied psychology with a leaning towards a utilitarian relationship with knowledge, the considerations we have so far offered represent a rather vertiginous point of abstraction. Geelan (n.d.) asks, “... is it possible to select those theories that are ‘useful, valid, true,’ for our society, our purposes?” and goes on to cite Polkinghorne’s (1992) distinction between the dominant modernist epistemology of academic psychology and the postmodern epistemology of practice-based knowledge. “The psychology of practice ... has come to understand that the human realm is fragmented and disparate and that knowledge of this realm is a human construction without a sure foundation. Yet this understanding has not led to a retreat into a disparaging skepticism; rather, it has led to an openness to diverse approaches for serving people in distress. The psychology of practices body of knowledge consists of the aggregate of the professional community’s experiences of what has been beneficial to clients. The criterion for acceptability of a knowledge claim is the fruitfulness of its implementation. The critical terminology of the epistemology of practice has shifted from metaphors of correctness to those of utility” (Polkinghorne 1992, p. 162).

On this basis, we will now extend the consideration of reflexivity and pluralism by changing standpoint and looking at it from a research praxis-based knowledge.

Returning to the review of the quality of the PPD research in relation to “owning one’s own perspective,” Goodbody noted how some of her own biases attuned her attention in particular ways to aspects of the research material. For instance, she had a consistently more “lazy eye” on gender and sexuality relative to ethnicity, a tendency that persisted at times even after personal exploration of it and attempts at corrective action. Furthermore,
using the justification that information on the social class of clinical psychologists is not collected and is a more indeterminate identity representation, she did not include class explicitly in the research design or interview questions (though she did try later to excavate its workings in the interview material). Such examples of selective focus are likely to be a function of the horizons constructed by the governmentality of our own gendered, raced, and classed subjectivities (Easpaig & Fryer 2008). They are a significant challenge for a pluralist approach premised upon multiperspectivity, especially when combined with the universalising tendencies of critical psychology theory and the aim of developing knowledge about subordinated realities. Whilst the second author, Burns (Goodbody’s supervisor), and the participants provided feedback useful for challenging assumptions and limitations of perspective, this was not adequate to the task.

We would argue that if psychology aspires to a more broadly relevant and multifaceted knowledge base, then both the theory and practice of critical personal reflexivity (e.g., Day 1993; Heron 2005) and a postmodernised Cartesian skepticism about our own situated perspectives (c.f. Elbow 1986), as a process integral to method, need further development. Group or team approaches to reflection and dialogue about analyses, particularly those based on systemic social constructionist methods for explicit positioning participants in conversations in the context of power relations, are most likely to bring the diversity of social perspectives required to enable rigorous attention to the plurivocality of research texts produced by a variety of qualitative methods. They could enable us to look beyond our own horizons and theoretical attachments into the lifeworlds and subjectivities of others, and by generating surprise and difference, facilitate a more open system of inquiry mirroring the multiple realities of complex open systems and processes that are the desirable and worthy focus of psychological study.

There are other issues of pluralism in the PPD research example. One of these is whether each method was in dilute form. Pluralism seen as eclecticism; that is, choosing the most appropriate principles from different systems of thought without signing up to the whole system, may not involve sufficient rigour of application of methods. A second issue is whether translating individual narrative analyses into a group analysis by means of constant comparison involved a violation of assumptions underlying a case-based method, thus causing a category error (i.e., treating one kind of knowledge as if it were another). Of course, the “case” can be conceived of as a micro-social unit which thereby can tell us about processes beyond the individual and allow “generalisation to theoretical propositions’ which are to some degree, transferable” (Riessman 2008, p. 13). However, the reporting of the results in terms of categorical gender and ethnic groupings of participants may have pushed the discourse more toward a quantitative way of thinking about the knowledge claims being made. Whilst arguably reflecting the distributions of similarity and difference between the cases, the group analysis could be criticised for reification of discursive categories (e.g., gender, ethnicity) by implying that “particular social categories capture the essence of people placed within them” (Willig 2008, p. 102), and so, for contravention of DA principles. Therefore, did the researcher (Goodbody) slip modes, out of the idiography, complexity, and holism of narrative thinking and into paradigmatic reasoning (Bruner 1987) and a pseudo-quantitative discourse about this second level of analysis and in reporting the “group results”? If so, here then is another opportunity for enhanced reflexivity in pluralist qualitative research. On reflection, it seems possible that the way in which the results were “authored” was, in part, organised (or “disciplined”) by assumptions about what may be required by still-dominant nomothetic discourses in psychology research, especially when produced for educational examination (Brown 2010).
Do epistemological disconjunctions and slipping modes matter? Feyerabend (1975) argued that the even scientific method is far from the pure and logically coherent entity it claims to be but rather an “epistemological anarchism.” So why should we expect qualitative methods of inquiry into social processes and psychological phenomena to be any better? As Geelan (n.d.) notes, it is often “when competing paradigms and perspectives meet within a particular study” that productive and interesting research happens. Furthermore, Denzin (1978) claimed that combining different methods can compensate for their individual deficiencies. All research, all knowledge, is flawed, partial, and imperfect. However, rigorous thinking is still important, and so let us move a further step on and away from the possibly insoluble metaphysical and epistemological issues of qualitative pluralism to consider whether the usefulness of results, for instance of the group results achieved by possibly dubious philosophical means, could mitigate the imperfections involved in the PPD research.

A utilitarian (concerned with ethics) or pragmatic (concerned with truth) perspective on methodological pluralism would assert that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. “…(e)valuation criteria need to be compatible with the epistemological framework of the study that is being evaluated” (Willig 2008, p. 157). So did the PPD research achieve a satisfactory outcome in terms of truth and ethics?

The research sought to find a way of addressing psychological questions of social importance, the theoretical and practical scope of which could not be encompassed by any single qualitative method. Whilst only a glimpse into the kinds of findings produced by the critical narrative analysis has been provided here, the approach did yield rich results reflecting the complexity of the topic, by “troubling the boundaries” of the categorical binary of individual and society, crossing and recrossing category boundaries to develop a psychological understanding of the management of personal and professional identities by socially-situated individuals. Therefore, key arguments favouring methodological pluralism, such as increased ability to address more complex questions incorporating the social context into psychological inquiry, added value in terms of richness of results, complex truths, “relevance” and “fair dealing” (Mays & Pope 2000), and higher levels of theoretical integration, were apparently supported by the PPD study. Pluralism in qualitative research also “has the capacity to mediate territorial clashes of discourse within the academy” (D’Cruz 1995, cited in Yardley 2008). It simply enables us to do more. It is more “fit for purpose,” the purpose of psychological inquiry, even if it does involve some troubling of psychology’s disciplinary practices.

How about letting the consumer (the research community) decide? This would be congruent with the Zeitgeist. Research itself can be seen as a social performance, involving the reification of social practices called methods (even in qualitative research) to produce commodified knowledges, kite-marked and branded, with distinct and different market values that are at least partly based on the discursive resource requirements of those who consume it to achieve the rhetorical justification of activities involved in maintaining the status quo of power relations.

However, an alternative perspective on the role of the consumer could be derived from Wittgenstein’s (1968) axiom, “meaning is use.” Considered this way, the consumer qua research practitioner/reader of research articles is attributed with agency and the capacity to shape the meaning of reported knowledge. Indeed, consumption in this sense could be seen as the competent act of completion (Vygotsky 1978) of the pluralist research process. Interpretations are always provisional, and ultimately, a reader is needed for the completion of the text (Ricoeur 1991, cited in Bamberg 2005). Thus, although we, for instance, as narrators of this article, may use our discursive skills to “curate” (Speedy 2008) and direct
your attention, thinking, and judgement about the object of concern, pluralism in qualitative research, we cannot author your conclusions. We can only be in dialogue (Bakhtin 1981; Pollard 2008) with you because “the speaker’s intent is always met with the analyst’s interpretation, which in turn, is [also] situated in discourses, history, politics and culture” (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou 2008, p. 14). Therefore, for instance, meanings about the PPD research can now evolve beyond those we could possibly imagine or intend due to the diverse ways different readers will construe our account of it. The meanings created “in use” through the act of putting knowledge out into the world, speak to both the inherent indeterminism of knowledge, however rigorously derived (Popper 2002), and the socially based development of its value. Researchers have discursive responsibilities to open the “texts” of their work to pluralist engagement in both how they language their stories and their practices of dissemination. These are considerations of at least equal weight to those about coherent and accountable epistemology and ontology in formal knowledge-generating methods.

**Conclusions**

Like narrative, “... ‘research’ is a ‘reading’ of the world, and the task is always on persuasion rather than proving” (Kellehear 1993, p. 25, cited in Fraser 2004). The narrative of this article has sought to persuade by means of a structured plot comparable to Labov’s (1972) analytic headings. We started with an abstract and then oriented the reader to issues for research into PPD. The complicating action arose from those issues in that the research questions could not be addressed by any single qualitative method, with the result (which was no more an actual resolution than in most narratives) that a composite of qualitative methods was designed to investigate the relationship between the individual and society in PPD. The coda or evaluation considered some of the problems and strengths of this “solution” in use in respect of key philosophical, social, and pragmatic concerns for pluralist qualitative research.

Reflecting on the writing of this article, we note that critical research in a postmodern vein does not accept that research conclusions are an “objective depiction of a stable other” but rather that “alternatives that encourage reflections and the ‘politics and poetics’ of their work” (Lindlof & Taylor 2002, p. 53) are deployed by authors. This is the so-called “crisis of representation.” Whilst the analyses in the research example drew on what Hones (1998) called the poetic voice in qualitative research, we chose a different voice to write with here. Furthermore, unsurprisingly, the authors do not always see with the same eye or speak with the same voice, yet we have written this article largely from a “we” pronoun position. Ironically, we did not fully exploit the potential dialogicality afforded by joint authorship to explore what our differences of perspective might bring to a discussion of pluralism. However, narratives are always a work-in-progress *sous rasure* (Derrida 1997), so what provisional and temporary conclusions may be derived from this particular one?

Rapport, Wainwright and Elwyn (2005) argued that “many researchers appear not to recognise the difference between methodology as the theoretical underpinning to research, and method as techniques employed to collect and analyse data” (p. 38), and that methods are (wrongly) privileged over methodology. We would argue that even when no active attempt is made to relate the jobs that different methods do together or to cohere them through using high level theory, a pluralist qualitative approach to research is likely to be more than the sum of its perspectives and therefore more appropriately struggled with as a postmodern methodology, a philosophically justifiable collection of concepts and practices, rather than just the simple practical deployment of a variety of tools or methods.
A caution is necessary, however, when thinking of pluralism as a methodology. It will need its own postmodern rigour, and it is only a beginning or a way of going on and not a solution. It will still only offer an imperfect and partial view: it is no new triangulating “God’s eye,” and care must be taken, especially when used in conjunction with grand theory, not to create totalizing closed systems. Its indeterminacy must be respected and maybe even exploited. Indeterminacy could be explored further by enhancing multiperspectivity through more elaborated critical reflexive practices.

The most compelling arguments supporting pluralism in qualitative research, regardless of the philosophical challenges it presents, remain those about what it can do in terms of richness of data and ways of thinking about data, promoting more wide-ranging theoretical development, integration, and interdisciplinarity. In particular, we have argued that its particular added value may be an ethical one in helping us to wrestle with more meaningful psychological and social questions, in ways that enhance the relevance and fair-dealing qualities of psychological research.

The proposition that conceptions of pluralism should be extended into the wider performative and interactive nature of qualitative research, beyond the means of production of the specific project, may be considered as an important theoretical and practical development for psychology, combining questions of truth with ethical commitments to socially just and responsible knowledge processes within a new research aesthetic.

“The goal of multiple, or critical triangulation is a fully grounded interpretative research project with an egalitarian base. Objective reality will never be captured. In-depth understanding, the use of multiple validities, not a single validity, a commitment to dialogue is sought in any interpretative study” (Denzin 2010).

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