# Pluralistic Data Analysis: Theory and Practice

In his provocatively titled book “The Qualitative Manifesto”, Denzin (2010) proposed that in order to effectively advocate the benefits of qualitative work to practitioners, policymakers and stakeholders, social science researchers must find ways of developing meaningful dialogue between and across paradigms. Arguing for “a greater openness to and celebration of the proliferation, intermingling, and confluence of paradigms and interpretative frameworks” (p.40), Denzin encouraged researchers to creatively embrace the tensions that arise when working with potentially disparate approaches. Methodological pluralism offers a strategy for researchers to engage in this paradigmatic dialogue, by bringing together multiple methods, data collections, theories, analyses, or disciplines within the same research project. Sport and exercise researchers may benefit from using a pluralistic approach as the phenomena we study are often dynamic, complex and multifaceted; at once physical, personal, social and cultural. Methodological pluralism can contribute to understanding some of this complexity, by describing and interpreting phenomena from a wide range of perspectives (Chamberlain, Cain, Sheridan & Dupuis, 2011).

Given the variety of ways that pluralism can be applied, to provide a precise definition would be somewhat antithetical to its nature. Instead, there are a number of key features that can be considered characteristic of this approach. Methodological pluralism begins from a position of *openness* toward accommodating a *multiplicity* of perspectives (McLean, 1996), where a perspective can be described as “an optic, a way of seeing” (Kellner, 1995 p.98). It actively seeks understanding through engaging in *dialogue* across lines of *difference*, or the “spaces between” disciplines, paradigms, theories, methodologies or methods (Collier, Moffatt & Perry, 2015 p.398; Johnson & Stefurak, 2014). A common end goal of methodological pluralism is to illuminate new or alternative insights that reflect the *multidimensional* *nature* of phenomenon (Coyle, 2010; Frost & Nolas, 2011).

This chapter focuses specifically on *analytical pluralism*; the application of multiple qualitative analytic methods to the same data set, which has received growing attention in psychology (e.g., Frost & Nolas, 2011; Frost & Shaw, 2014) and responds to calls for greater methodological diversity in sport and exercise research (e.g., Culver, Gilbert & Sparkes, 2012; Giardina & Laurendeau, 2013; Poczwardowski, Barott & Jowett, 2006; Sparkes, 2013). This approach shares some similarities with mixed methods research (see chapter 29), but extends the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to encompass multiple qualitative perspectives within the same study. It also resonates with interdisciplinary research, as it may involve mixing perspectives creatively and critically to transcend paradigm ‘boundaries’; although analytical pluralism can also be applied within the same paradigm. These methodological approaches are compared in Table 1.

In this chapter we aim to highlight the potential benefits of bringing multi-layered insight to complex phenomena and critically reflect upon the theoretical challenges of mixing multiple analyses within a single study. Using research examples from sport and exercise and the social sciences more widely, we discuss the practical implications of analyzing qualitative data pluralistically. Finally, we offer some considerations for future research to encourage discussion around how analytical pluralism can be creatively applied within the field of sport and exercise.

## Pluralistic Data Analysis

In practice, pluralistic data analysis involves the application of two or more analytical techniques to qualitative data, in order to represent multiple aspects of the phenomena under investigation. Analyses can be applied in sequence or concurrently, by researchers working alone or as part of a team, and can be underpinned by convergent or divergent philosophical assumptions. For example, a discursive analysis alongside or followed by a phenomenological analysis could be brought together within the same study, to examine both the lived experience and linguistic construction of an event. Analytical pluralism has the potential to highlight the dynamic and complex nature of sport and exercise phenomena through the comparison of findings produced from different analytic frameworks. Researchers may recognize a similarity here with the methodological approach of *bricolage*, where methods are actively constructed and applied as required to pursue complexity and move beyond reductionist, monological forms of knowledge (Kincheloe, 2005). Analytical pluralism offers a technique for researchers to practice interpretative bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), by engaging with a variety of analysis tools within a research study and promoting theoretical eclecticism.

Analytical pluralism views knowledge produced from multiple analyses as complementary, rather than contradictory, as each can represent a different aspect of the social world (Frost et al., 2011). However, the inclusion of methods from different paradigms within the same study gives rise to tensions concerning the commensurability of findings. That is, if analytic methods are underpinned by fundamentally different assumptions about the world or what can be known about the world, their combination may be deemed incompatible, rendering findings incoherent (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). When these tensions are recognized and addressed, analytical pluralism has the potential to produce diverse findings that are sensitive to the variation and subtlety of human expression and which can speak to different audiences (Frost & Nolas, 2011).

**Benefits of Pluralistic Data Analysis**

There are several possible advantages that analytical pluralism may offer to sport and exercise researchers. First is its potential to develop richer, nuanced and more complex understandings of phenomena than one analytic technique could offer alone, by accommodating findings produced from multiple methods of analysis that attend to different aspects of data within the same study. In comparison to the relative limitations imposed by the specific focus of a single analytic method, pluralistic analysis enables different interpretive possibilities to be explored. Accordingly, research questions can be tackled from multiple perspectives concurrently. This is demonstrated by Ronkainen, Tikkanen, Littlewood and Nesti (2014), who combined thematic analysis and narrative analysis with an existential interpretative lens to address the question ‘How do athletes bring personal meaning to their careers?’ (see Table 2). An existential framework enabled the researchers to explore how meaning, spirituality and authenticity manifested in athletes’ life-worlds, while narrative analysis allowed these themes to be situated within historically and culturally embedded storylines. Similarly, as summarized in Table 2, Caddick, Smith and Phoenix (2015) drew upon phenomenological understandings alongside a narrative analysis to explore the question ‘What are the effects of surfing and the natural environment on the well-being of combat veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?’ The authors showed how stories that were influential in shaping the veterans’ surfing experiences were also grounded in the visceral qualities of their immersion in the ocean environment. By balancing a narrative focus on broader cultural storylines with a phenomenological emphasis on immediate embodied experience, the findings described how veterans experienced surfing as ‘respite’ from PTSD and as an activity constituted through bodily sensations.

As these studies illustrated, the emphasis on lived experience and agency in an existential/phenomenological analysis allowed for participants’ personal, embodied experiences to be represented, whereas the focus on language and storytelling in a narrative analysis highlighted the socially and culturally situated nature of these experiences. This suggests that pluralistic research can most effectively represent the multidimensional nature of phenomena when analyses with divergent assumptions about the social world are employed (Clarke et al., 2015). However, pluralistic research does not claim to develop *fuller* understandings of sport and exercise phenomena in a manner that would incorrectly imply that the application of more than one analytical method can help to achieve a more complete representation of reality (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Neville, 2013). Neither does it offer a form of triangulation to seek corroboration between findings (see Table 1). Rather, analytical pluralism offers an alternative way of representing multiple and potentially contrasting aspects of phenomena.

Alternatively, multiple analyses applied from within the *same* paradigm can also facilitate richer understandings than using one analytic method only. For example, within a narrative framework, Busanich, McGannon and Schinke (2014) undertook a structural analysis to examine the organization and form of distance runners’ stories of disordered eating, alongside a performative analysis to explore how and why these stories were told. Findings from the structural analysis described how participants’ stories were often framed in a performance narrative of winning, results and achievement. In comparison, the performative analysis highlighted that male and female athletes talked about disordered eating in different and gendered ways; in particular that male athletes hid or downplayed negative weight-loss thoughts and behaviors, whereas female athletes normalized disordered eating experiences as part of the elite performance culture. Using multiple analyses in this way enabled both the broader cultural templates that were drawn upon and participants’ situated telling of their stories to be illuminated.

A second benefit to researchers is the potential that analytical pluralism offers for enhanced reflexivity; the act of examining and acknowledging how the researcher’s background, assumptions and position impacts upon the research process (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Pluralism has the capacity to support researchers toward a deeper appreciation of the role of the researcher in analyzing data and constructing findings through highlighting the “constitutive force of theory” within qualitative analyses (Honan, Knobel, Baker and Davies, 2000 p.9). That is, analytic methods are imbued with fundamental philosophical, theoretical or disciplinary assumptions that guide the analyst toward certain interpretations over others. In his disquisition of sport coaching practice research, North (2013) commented that the different meta-theoretical positions of psychological scientism or sociological interpretivism encourage researchers to ask different questions, use different concepts and methodologies, and do different types of work. For example, psychological approaches may seek to explain coach behavior using universal models, whereas sociologically informed analyses may focus on the contextual and situational nature of coaching. Working with methods pluralistically can help researchers to recognize and make clear why they have employed particular analytical tools and how these have influenced their findings.

Reflexive awareness is especially called for when different approaches are brought together within the same study. Analysts may find they are required to shift their own perspectives in order to sufficiently attend to their participants’ multiple ways of expression, or adjust to analyzing data produced from within an unfamiliar framework (Barnes et al., 2014; Frost et al., 2010). Ronkainen et al. (2014) commented that a group of researchers working individually and collaboratively with data allowed them to develop a critical reflexivity. Each researcher brought a diverse interpretation of the notions of spirituality and authenticity to the study, which enhanced the analytical dialogue among the group. Pluralism thus provides opportunities for enhanced critical reflexivity regarding analytical practice.

The potential of pluralistic data analysis to achieve multi-layered insight into phenomena offers a third benefit to researchers, by producing findings which are relevant to difference audiences. Analytical pluralism avoids reducing understandings to one particular interpretive framework, meaning that findings can be accessible to audiences with diverse theoretical, axiological, methodological, or disciplinary allegiances (Frost & Nolas, 2013). Furthermore, by enabling contrasting versions of the social world to be presented with equal significance, pluralism invites researchers to consider not whether one particular interpretation is right or better, but as Honan et al. (2000) suggested, “when each one could be useful and for what purpose” (p.30). In addition to promoting methodological rigor, this has the potential to be of practical benefit. For example, North (2013) advocated that each interpretative lens, be it psychologically or sociologically tilted, can add something new or different to the development of a meaningful and coherent picture of sport coaching practice. Coaching practitioners can then select the findings most relevant to their own practical experience to guide their action toward a specific goal. Encouraging the synthesis of theoretical and experiential knowledge in pursuit of practical goals can help to generate new ways of understanding reality and transform inquiry from *theoria* into *praxis*.

Illustrating how pluralistic findings can be useful to stakeholders, McGannon and Spence’s (2010) analysis of women’s exercise adherence integrated ethnomethodology, to examine the action-orientated nature of everyday talk, and post-structuralism, to focus on discourses, power and subjectivity (see Table 2). Findings were produced that reflected both the “*process* and *outcome* of language” (McGannon & Mauw, 2000; McGannon & Spence, 2010 p.18, italics in original). The authors suggested that increasing women’s awareness of how agency is limited by prevailing discourses reproduced by historical and material conditions (the process of language) when choosing whether or not to exercise (the outcome of language), can encourage an expansion of discursive resources. In turn, this can empower women to develop identities that facilitate, rather than restrict, their exercise behavior, and reduce feelings of guilt or self-blame for their lack of exercise.

**Challenges of Pluralistic Data Analysis**

Ontological assumptions regarding the nature of existence and epistemological assumptions regarding access to and the constitution of knowledge (see chapter 1) often diverge between different analytical frameworks. Consequently, when analyses imbued with contrasting philosophical assumptions are brought together within the same study, it can be difficult to maintain theoretically coherent understandings and explanations of phenomena, and demonstrate the overall commensurability of findings (Lincoln et al., 2011). For example, mixing a realist or moderate constructionist perspective (which assumes there is a single, objective reality and often underpins a realist thematic analysis (see chapter 15) and Strausserian versions of grounded theory (see chapter 2)) with a more explicitly social constructionist or post-modern worldview (which foregrounds the existence of multiple, fluid realities, as endorsed by narrative analysis (see chapter 20), Bourdieusian informed analysis or, Foucauldian discourse analysis (see chapter 18)) raises tricky questions over how the combined findings are to be interpreted. Are findings considered as representations of personal experience, as culturally situated narratives, or as subject positions created by and located within prevailing structural frameworks[[1]](#footnote-1)? Can underlying paradigmatic differences be reconciled, and if so, how? Or, alternatively, if different philosophical positions are not held to be fundamentally incompatible, how can meaningful dialogue across paradigms be established?

To help sport and exercise researchers grapple with these tensions, there is a useful distinction to be made between *ontological* and *epistemological* pluralism (Clarke et al., 2015). Ontological pluralism assumes that the world itself is multiple and plural. From this stance, different philosophical positions are not held to be foundational and mutually exclusive, but as dialectical and mutually informing. This allows researchers to hold tensions lightly together and interact with multiple paradigms simultaneously (Cooper & McLeod, 2011; Johnson & Stefurak, 2014). In contrast, epistemological pluralism obviates incoherence by using multiple analytic methods that are underpinned by a consistent ontological position to produce diverse, yet complementary forms of knowledge. This reflects the belief that multiple forms of knowledge can be produced without imposing concomitant ontological claims and enables researchers to use a wide range of perspectives to understand phenomena (Kellner, 1995). Without necessarily seeking to resolve philosophical differences, the challenge for researchers wishing to engage with analytical pluralism is, therefore, to work creatively and reflexively to “hold together interpretations that make sense within their own frames of reference but create epistemological tension when juxtaposed or integrated” (Coyle, 2010, p.82). Recognizing and addressing paradigmatic tensions within a study is essential to achieving *structural integrity*; “a coherent rationale that considers the question, context, and assumptions that presumably hold the study together” (Walsh & Koelsch, 2012 p.386).

A further challenge lies in how to judge the quality of pluralistic research (see chapter 25). Although universally applicable criteria for evaluating qualitative research are considered problematic (Smith and Deemer, 2000), it is generally accepted that researchers need to demonstrate analytical rigor and maintain meaningful coherence between purpose, theory, methods, analysis and representation (e.g., Sparkes & Smith, 2009; Tracy, 2010). When multiple analytic methods are used and potentially divergent theoretical perspectives are mixed, the challenges of establishing rigor and maintaining coherence are multiplied. The evaluation of pluralistic research may therefore extend to whether the procedures followed for each analysis were transparent, and whether multiple interpretations were adequately evidenced by data. Assessing whether the commensurability of diverse findings was satisfactorily addressed may also indicate the extent to which interpretations are meaningfully interconnected with the research question, philosophical assumptions and methods.

As with all high quality research, studies adopting analytical pluralism should also seek to make a significant contribution to knowledge. In areas where analytical pluralism is relatively untested as a strategy for conducting research in sport and exercise, its capacity to advance the translation of knowledge into practice or deepen theoretical understandings is as yet undetermined. Where studies have been conducted (see examples in Table 2), there is evidence to suggest that using multiple analytic techniques can help to develop more complex and multi-layered understandings of sport and exercise phenomena. Yet there is also the danger that analytical pluralism could simply become a hollow rhetorical device if researchers fail to communicate a clear rationale for its value in relation to a specific research project (Chamberlain et al., 2011). Indeed, in the absence of a well-crafted rationale and carefully reasoned theoretical position, the danger exists that analytical pluralism could become merely a showcase of the different methods available to us. Rather than pursuing pluralism because it is perceived to be an innovative and useful methodological approach, sport and exercise researchers therefore face the challenge of demonstrating how pluralism might be used creatively within psychology and sociology to advance current knowledge.

## Applying Pluralistic Data Analysis in Practice

In addition to the philosophical and empirical challenges that analytical pluralism entails, researchers wishing to engage with this approach are presented with a number of methodological decisions and considerations.

### Research questions.

For some studies in sport and exercise research, the traditional approach of adopting a single analytical tool to interpret data is an entirely suitable strategy for addressing a specific research question. Research questions arise from and are informed by the researcher’s epistemological, ontological and theoretical assumptions. Therefore, research questions that are explicitly designed to understand a phenomenon from multiple perspectives may be better addressed using analytical pluralism. This may include research questions with multiple parts (see examples in Table 2). Furthermore, projects can evolve to include pluralistic analysis, as Yanchar, Gantt and Clay suggest of critical methodology:

[W]ithin any program of research, contextually sensitive research strategies are required, existing questions and strategies must be continually examined and often changed with context and experience, and new questions and strategies must be formulated based on the practical demands of research. (2005, p.36).

In our own research, we have experienced the process of adapting our methodologies to encompass more analytical perspectives as we became more immersed in our research settings and were drawn to find ways of representing additional dimensions of participants’ experiences or the structural components that shaped their subjectivity. Although this data-driven rationale may be problematic, as it implies a preliminary reading of data that is inexorably influenced by the researcher (Clarke et al., 2015), this can be anticipated and managed when researchers start out from a position of *openness* and with a commitment to reflexivity throughout the research process.

### Paradigmatic assumptions.

Paradigms matter, not least because they underpin and inform a study’s research question, purpose, methods and design (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). When multiple analyses are employed with differing associated philosophical assumptions, it becomes even more relevant to articulate how and why findings remain comprehensible. The first task for the pluralistic researcher, therefore, is to understand the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of analytical methods and the relationship between them. Building on this awareness, researchers can then explore strategies to address incommensurability.

Framing findings produced from multiple analyses within the same ontological position (epistemological pluralism) provides one technique to avoid incoherence. For example, Ronkainen et al. (2014) combined existential and narrative perspectives within a consistent critical realist ontological position. This integration was built upon the shared assumptions between existentialism, with its focus on meaning and subjectivity, and a psychosocial approach to narrative, which practices a deep fidelity to the centrality of experience (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). This demonstrated a core thread of theoretical continuity by foregrounding the assumption that authentic being and selfhood is a fundamental feature of existence. From within a more critical framework, McGannon and Spence (2010) held together ethnomethodological and post-structural analyses of women’s physical self and exercise behavior, through the shared ontological position that self-related phenomenon are socially constituted through discourse.

Alternatively, for researchers engaging in ontological pluralism, strategies have been proposed for interacting with the tensions that may arise when multiple paradigms are brought together within the same study. Approaches including pragmatism (see Giacobbi, Poczwardowski & Hager, 2005 and Neville, 2013, for discussions in relation to sport and exercise) and dialectical pluralism (Johnson & Stefurak, 2014), make sense of findings produced through multiple analyses by uniting interpretations within a shared axiological position – the nature of ethics and values in a study. Emphasizing the role of engaging stakeholders in the research process, knowledge is judged in relation to its value for the specific project. However, whereas pragmatism is unconcerned about the relationship between knowledge and reality, Johnson and Stefurak (2014, p.67) discuss a respect for “realities that are thoughtfully constructed and revised by multiple paradigms and disciplines”, and encourage researchers to actively attend to tensions within and between paradigms in order to extend understanding. It is by engaging with, rather than setting aside, these lines of difference that the full potential of pluralistic understandings can be realized.

### Data.

In sport and exercise research, analytical pluralism has been applied to different types of data, including interviews texts, participant observation and participant-created reflective writing (see Table 2); illustrating the potential for this approach to be applied to diverse data sets. It is prudent to consider whether data are accessible to multiple analytic techniques, as analyses differ in their requirements from qualitative data. Broadly speaking, phenomenological analyses work with accounts of lived-experience, narrative analyses with stories, discursive analyses with everyday talk and ethnographic analyses with social-cultural observations. Some analyses have particular transcription requirements, for example conversation analysis is best performed when transcription includes details of the delivery of talk such as overlap, pitch and emphasis (see Groom, Cushion & Nelson, 2012, for an example of this transcription). Therefore, researchers may wish to reflect upon the implications of decisions in relation to recruitment, data collection methods and transcription procedures when designing pluralistic research studies.

### Analytical methods.

The choice of which methods of analyses to use together, and how many, is informed by the research question and will inevitably influence the findings that can be produced and the comparisons that can be drawn between them. As noted above, the multidimensional nature of phenomena can be effectively brought into view when analyses with divergent epistemological or ontological underpinnings are employed within the same study. Therefore, pluralistic researchers should seek to present a clear rationale for their selection of analytic methods, explaining the fit with the underpinning philosophical assumptions and the research question. To demonstrate research quality, reporting of the application of methods requires careful consideration. Adequate descriptions of the procedures used to select, transform and organize data may help to establish rigor, transparency and meaningful coherence, and enable studies to be judged on their individual merits and limitations (Walsh & Koelsch, 2012).

Decisions regarding the number of analyses to perform may be influenced by the availability of resources. The significant investment of time given the methodological reflexivity this approach demands, the potential training needs of researchers seeking to perform unfamiliar analyses and the word restrictions of journal publications may shape decisions about the number of analyses (Coyle, 2010; Josselin & Willig, 2014). Moreover, although the capacity of pluralism to illuminate multiple dimensions of phenomenon may draw researchers to conclude that more analyses are better, the presentation of multiple findings may risk becoming so complicated that implications for theory or practice are unclear (Clarke et al., 2015; Frost et al., 2010). Thoughtful construction of pluralistic research questions and findings may help researchers to negotiate this balance.

### Research design.

In practice, analytical pluralism can be undertaken in a variety of ways, by an individual or group of researchers. Researchers can apply multiple analytic frames to a data set on their own (e.g., Aitchison, 2005; Frost, 2009) or can work as part of a group, in which members undertake multiple analyses together (e.g., Ronkainen, Ryba & Nesti, 2013; Ronkainen et al., 2014) or independently analyze a data set each in a different way (e.g., Frost et al., 2010; Honan et al., 2000). For the individual researcher working pluralistically, or for groups performing analytical pluralism together, the sequencing of methods becomes pertinent. Will analyses be applied in a particular order, or undertaken concurrently? In both instances, the interaction between methods (i.e., the influence of prior analyses in shaping subsequent interpretations) invites reflection. McGannon and Spence’s (2010) analytical strategy involved using an ethnomethodological analysis to first identify key discourses in their participant’s accounts, before applying a post-structural analysis to explore how these discourses were used. The authors acknowledged how the discourses identified in the first analytic stage informed their second analysis. Also using a sequential approach, Ronkainen et al. (2013; 2014) performed a thematic analysis to highlight existential aspects of data, followed by a narrative analysis to explore the content and form of stories. Although the authors did not discuss a rationale for this sequencing, this movement from the personal to the cultural aligns with Josselin and Willig’s (2014) explanation for applying a phenomenological analysis before subsequent narrative and psychosocial analyses; “in an effort to protect potential phenomenological insights from ‘contamination’ by more constructed, theory-led interpretations.” (p.30). In contrast, Caddick et al. (2015) sought to incorporate phenomenological interpretations (see chapter 16) within a dialogical narrative analysis (see chapter 20), by undertaking analyses concurrently. This approach presents additional challenges, such as how to move fluidly between analyses to allow potentially divergent meanings to emerge and avoid privileging one framework over another.

From our own early experiences of attempting analytical pluralism, we have found that a sequential approach, where one analytical lens is brought to the fore while others are temporarily set aside (in a manner akin to analytical bracketing; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) demanded a great deal of discipline and reflection, as our own proclivities inescapably led us to ‘see’ certain aspects within data. Alternatively, we have found techniques such as *feedback looping* (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004) beneficial in enabling the analyst to move flexibly within and between analyses. Starting with the text, the researcher selects an analysis method to thread through data and back to the text, creating a feedback loop which can expand, modify or challenge existing interpretations. Feedback loops are used to guide the analyst from one interpretative lens to the next, in a non-linear fashion (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). For example, Frost (2009) described how this form of approach allowed for ‘jumping-off points’ to move fluidly between structural, linguistic and reflexive narrative analyses of an interview transcript, when a focus of interest was recognized in the data. Allowing for jumping-off (and on) in response to points in the data, a previous interpretation, or the subjectivity of the researcher, can enable reflexive concurrent analyses, but relies upon the researcher maintaining an awareness of what prompts a shift in focus. Using theoretical and procedural memos to record analytical notes and interpretations can encourage fluid movement between analyses, exploration of their inter-connections and enhanced reflexivity (Caddick et al., 2015).

### Representation and dissemination.

A key advantage of analytical pluralism is that rich and nuanced understandings of phenomena can be developed, but this raises the question of how to adequately represent enhanced depth and complexity. The decisions made in relation to how to represent and interpret pluralistic findings are integral to realizing this potential and to avoid pluralism simply becoming an exercise in illustrating differences between methods. Researchers can choose to present the findings produced from each analysis separately, drawing upon relevant extracts of data to evidence interpretations. This enables the reader to compare findings and appreciate points of convergence and divergence between them (e.g., Frost et al., 2011; Honan et al., 2000) and can allow for multiple possibilities of being to be constructed, rather than ‘finalizing’ participants to an either/or ontological status (Bakhtin, 1984). For example, Frost et al. (2011) suggested that by presenting various dimensions of the experience of second-time motherhood with equal significance, their participant could be recognized as a phenomenological, realist and post-modern agent, depending on her context.

A different approach to presenting pluralistic findings involves pursuing an integrated synthesis of findings (see examples in Table 2). Here, multiple interpretations are woven together, but remain individually identifiable through the choice of language used to construct findings or the theoretical lens used to locate the interpretations. Ronkainen et al. (2014) structured their findings around four narratives of personal and spiritual meaning in sport that were identified in participants’ accounts, each incorporating existential themes. Interpretations placed existential meanings (recognizably grounded in the phenomenological philosophy of Heidegger) in dialogue with cultural narratives (identifiable through reference to ‘dominant’ and ‘counter’ storylines), to offer an understanding of how participants’ meanings were created in and through different stories. A third possible strategy is to present both separate and integrated analyses, such as in King, Finlay, Ashworth, Smith, Langdridge and Butt’s (2008) exploration of the phenomenon of mistrust. This approach made clear to the reader how each individual analyst constructed their findings, and how these varied depending on their respective epistemological commitments, while also presenting a consensual account of their participant’s embodied and relational experience of mistrust.

However researchers choose to represent pluralistic findings, it is perhaps the comparisons drawn between different interpretations that can offer more to sport and exercise than studies which adopt a single analytical technique. Contrasting findings encourages researchers to attend to the *spaces between* analytical frameworks and emphasizes “learning from the juxtaposition of divergent ideas and ways of seeing” (Kincheloe, 2005 p.344). Aitchison (2005) provides a helpful illustration of this. Exploring gender power relations in sport and leisure management, Aitchison used cultural theory to describe accounts and perceptions of gender inequality in employment settings, combined with structural analysis to explain how and why such practices are constructed, legitimated and reproduced within the industry. Interconnections between these mutually informing perspectives were explicitly examined, to highlight how gender power relations were shaped globally by patriarchy and capitalism via organizational structures, procedures and policies, and also locally through social and cultural discourses and processes.

Comparisons of this nature may facilitate findings which are accessible to diverse audiences including researchers from different academic disciplines, practitioners and policy makers. Research in the sport and exercise domain has begun to demonstrate how analytical pluralism can make a significant contribution to knowledge and practice, through outlining empowerment strategies for women exercisers (McGannon & Spence, 2010), proposing additions to existing theoretical models of career transitions in sport (Ronkainen et al., 2014) and providing implications for the use of surfing in the treatment and support for combat veterans experiencing PTSD (Caddick et al., 2015). Researchers may therefore benefit from reflecting upon how analytical pluralism can contribute to knowledge production, through an exploration of tensions that arise when mixing multiple perspectives within the same study, or production of findings with relevance to different audiences.

## Considerations for the Future

For researchers wishing to engage with analytical pluralism in informed ways, this chapter has highlighted the importance of attending to the theoretical and practical challenges that seeking multiple understandings of phenomena entails, especially when analyses with different philosophical underpinnings are employed within the same study. Finding ways to recognize and address the paradigmatic tensions this creates is paramount. Analytical pluralism requires researchers to carefully consider how to demonstrate the quality of pluralistic research, make informed decisions about applying multiple analyses in practice and find ways to adequately represent potentially complex and diverse findings.

These challenges notwithstanding, research within the sport and exercise domain has illustrated the capacity of analytical pluralism to highlight the multidimensional nature of phenomena, enhance researcher reflexivity and make a meaningful contribution to theory, knowledge and practice. With these advantages in mind, analytical pluralism may appeal to those researchers seeking to develop more complex understandings of their data while avoiding the constraints of ‘off-the-shelf’ prescriptive methodologies (Chamberlain, 2012; Josselin & Willig, 2014). We encourage researchers to creatively consider how the principles of methodological pluralism; an openness toward accommodating a multiplicity of perspectives, engagement with difference through dialogue, and a desire to represent the multidimensional nature of phenomenon, can be applied within the dynamic field of sport and exercise research.

In particular, studies which apply psychological and sociological analytic lenses to the same data set may glean interesting findings. By contrasting findings produced from multiple analytic frames that vary in the extent to which they privilege agency, the body and social interaction as some psychological approaches may do, or structure, language, and cultural reproduction as is often the focus of sociological inquiry, more complex versions of the social world can emerge. Moreover, implications for policy and practice can be grounded in an axiological commitment to develop critical and ethical knowledge that is relevant for sport and exercise users, providers and governing bodies. While we do not wish to suggest that this would be a straightforward or unproblematic endeavor, this type of project resonates with Sparkes (2013) reflections on the implications of Denzin’s (2010) call for a greater openness to paradigmatic dialogue for sport and exercise research. Sparkes broadly supported this position, although firmly cautioned against dissolving or ignoring tensions when mixing different perspectives. Instead, he suggested that sharing ideas, concepts and techniques between sport and exercise researchers and critically exploring points of convergence and divergence across psychological, sociological, philosophical and pedagogical disciplines may lead to alternative forms of dialogue and heightened understandings of the power relations within the academic community. Therefore, as Sparkes (2013) recognized, this approach may have the potential to galvanize researchers through a common social justice agenda and collective action; in doing so disrupting the political knowledge hierarchy that currently constrains progressive qualitative research.

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# Table 1: Characteristics of Pluralistic Research Approaches

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Characteristic** | **Pluralistic Data Analysis** | **Mixed Methods Research** | **Interdisciplinary Research** |
| Example uses | - Build complementarity (complex understandings of phenomena)  - Produce findings relevant to difference audiences | - Build complementarity (complex understandings of phenomena)  - Triangulate findings (identify areas of convergence to enhance credibility) | - Build complementarity (complex understandings of phenomena)  - Develop a critical approach to knowledge production |
| Analysis methods | Mixing of two or more qualitative methods from the same or different disciplines | Mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods | Active construction of methods from more than one discipline |
| Application of analysis methods | Sequential or concurrent | Typically sequential | Typically concurrent |
| Representation of findings | Parallel or integrated | Typically parallel | Typically integrated |

# Table 2: Pluralistic Data Analysis in Practice: Some Examples from Sport and Exercise Research

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Study** | **Research Question** | **Philosophical Assumptions** | **Data Collection** | **Data Analysis** | **Findings Presented** |
| Caddick et al. (2015) | What effects do surfing and the natural environment have on the well-being of combat veterans experiencing PTSD? | Narrative shapes experience, and experience shapes narrative, recursively (ontological claim) | 15 semi-structured life history interviews with veterans and participant observation | Dialogical narrative analysis (Frank, 2012) with phenomenological analysis (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007) | Surfing as ‘respite’ from PTSD narrative presented, as constituted through embodied sensations  Effects of surfing on subjective well-being described  How surfing facilitated respite and influenced veterans’ well-being discussed |
| McGannon & Spence (2010) | What kinds of self-descriptions are available for use in women’s conversations in relation to physical activity? Towards what end do women use these ways of speaking to afford and limit their physical activity behavior? | Self-related phenomena are constituted and brought into being in social activity, particularly in discourse (ontological claim) | Five in-depth, open-ended interviews with one female participant | Discursive psychology (ethnomethodology) with discourse analysis (post-structural) | Three common discourses presented: the body; exercise and physical appearance; and exercise and physiology  Implications of discourses for self-construction and exercise behaviors discussed |
| Ronkainen et al. (2014) | How do athletes bring personal meaning to their careers? Do athletes experience authenticity? What are the career concerns of athletes? | Critical realism: realist ontology and constructivist epistemology | 10 high-level athletes produced reflective writing of their sporting practices | Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) followed by holistic narrative analyses of content and form (Lieblich et al., 1998); narratives then interpreted through an existential lens | Four storylines presented: struggle for authenticity; sustained love for the performance sport; sport as experiencing and expressing through the body; and sport as a spiritual journey  How existential meaning was brought to athletic lives through storylines discussed |

1. A subject position describes “a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire” (Davies & Harré, 1999 p.35). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)