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Analytical Pluralism in Qualitative Research: A Meta-study

Abstract

Recent interest in analytical pluralism – the application of more than one qualitative analytical method to a single data set – has demonstrated its potential to produce multiple, complex and varied understandings of phenomena. However tensions remain regarding the commensurability of findings produced from diverse theoretical frameworks, the practical application of multiple methods of analysis and the capacity of pluralism to contribute to knowledge in psychology. This study addresses these issues, through a critical interpretation of existing qualitative studies that utilised analytical pluralism. Using a meta-study design, we examined the use of theory, application of methods and production of findings in studies that had adopted qualitative analytical pluralism. Following comprehensive database searches, 10 articles were included in the analysis. Epistemological and ontological considerations, the influence of decisions made in the practical application of pluralism and approaches to interpreting findings produced from multiple analyses are discussed, and implications for future research are considered.

Key words: Pluralistic approach, multiple methods, polyvocal, qualitative data analysis, methodology, theory, psychology.

19 **Analytical Pluralism in Qualitative Research: A Meta-study**

20 In seeking to explore the diversity and complexity of our social world, psychologists
21 are increasingly turning to pluralistic methods of research. Indeed, *Qualitative Research in*
22 *Psychology* devoted a special issue to the theoretical and practical considerations of pluralism
23 in qualitative research (Frost & Nolas, 2011). There are many possible kinds of pluralism,
24 including the use of multiple methods, data sources, theories, or researchers. However, the
25 focus of this paper reflects a burgeoning interest in analytical pluralism; the combination of
26 multiple methods of qualitative data analysis within the same study. For the purposes of this
27 analysis, pluralism is defined as the application of more than one qualitative analytical
28 method to a single data set. Put simply, analytical pluralism recognises that “a data set can
29 tell us about a number of different things, depending on the questions we ask of it” (Willig,
30 2013, p. 19). It offers researchers an alternative to the orthodox approach of adopting a
31 specific, recognised mono-methodology; the uncritical adoption of which can lead to
32 methodolatry (the reification and privileging of methods) and a reticence to adapt methods to
33 suit the research context (Chamberlain, 2000; 2011; Chamberlain, Cain, Sheridan, & Dupuis,
34 2011).

35 Advocates of analytical pluralism start from the position that different forms of
36 knowledge produced through diverse methods of analysis may be viewed as complementary,
37 rather than mutually exclusive, as each can reflect a different aspect of the phenomenon of
38 interest (Frost et al., 2011). Analytic methods therefore provide tools which enable
39 researchers to attend to different things in the data. By combining analyses which examine
40 the data in a variety of ways (e.g. through emphasis of the individual or the social), analytical
41 pluralism has the capacity to produce richer understandings of phenomena, and avoid
42 reductionism (Kincheloe, 2001; 2005; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004).

43 Additionally, some scholars maintain that multiple analytic approaches are

44 appropriate for understanding a plural and complex world and that the variety of human
45 expression cannot always be adequately represented by one framework alone (e.g.
46 Chamberlain et al., 2011; Frost et al., 2011; Kincheloe, 2001; 2005). This stance suggests that
47 the application of more than one analysis can enable researchers to explore the multiple
48 dimensions of phenomena without being limited to a single perspective, and can allow for the
49 maximum interpretative value to be gleaned from the data (Coyle, 2010). The potential
50 benefits of this approach to psychological research are that; findings which may speak to
51 different audiences can be produced; the strengths of one analytic method can be used to
52 offset the limitations of another; and reflexivity may be enhanced through an increased focus
53 on the impact of the researcher's biography, experience and application of technique (Frost et
54 al., 2010).

55 Although the position and potential advantages of analytical pluralism have been
56 articulated, there remain tensions and challenges which researchers wishing to adopt this
57 approach must address. The practice of using multiple analyses within a single study can
58 involve researchers attempting to mix disparate and sometimes dissonant approaches.
59 Researchers may choose to pursue an integrated blend of findings, where the boundaries
60 between different analytic frames are blurry – or to construct separate findings from each
61 analysis, where the distinctions between methods are clear (Kincheloe, 2001). This demands
62 that researchers are aware of, and maintain conceptual clarity between, the differences in the
63 philosophical underpinnings of methodologies (Willig, 2013). This is of pertinence to
64 research projects which utilise analytic methods imbued with elements from competing
65 paradigms within the same study.

66 Concerns have been raised that methods of analysis should not be combined when the
67 paradigms which underpin the methods are incompatible. Paradigms diverge on beliefs about
68 the nature of existence (ontology), the possibility and character of valid knowledge

69 (epistemology) and the nature of ethics and values (axiology). Thus, if paradigms are upheld
70 as foundational and mutually exclusive, integrating opposing approaches may render findings
71 incommensurable and incoherent (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). This therefore requires
72 researchers to recognise differences and find appropriate ways to engage with multiple
73 ontological, epistemological and axiological positions to produce coherent theoretical
74 understandings and explanations of phenomena. The task for researchers then, is to work
75 creatively to “hold together interpretations that make sense within their own frames of
76 reference but create epistemological tension when juxtaposed or integrated” (Coyle, 2010, p.
77 82). It is unclear whether researchers have to date adequately accounted for this issue.

78 Another consideration for pluralistic research is how to judge its quality. The diversity
79 within qualitative research has led to competing claims as to what counts as quality, and
80 different paradigms or approaches often have their own criteria for evaluating research (e.g.
81 Cresswell, 2007; Seale, 1999). Pre-established criteria may present additional problems if
82 researchers attempt to combine qualitative methods of analysis associated with diverse
83 quality criteria. Suitable ways to enhance and judge the quality of analytical pluralism
84 therefore requires further reflection from researchers.

85 Furthermore, the practical application of analytical pluralism to research in
86 psychology may raise concerns which, due to the novelty of the approach, have not yet been
87 fully addressed. Coyle (2010) questions how researchers discern which theoretical
88 perspectives or methods are most suitable to apply to a data set, and how they decide the
89 number of analyses to be performed within a study; given the aim of generating specific,
90 meaningful implications, and the financial constraints of projects and word restrictions of
91 journal articles. Once these decisions have been made, there are further considerations
92 regarding how researchers undertake pluralistic analysis in practice. For example, whether
93 data is read by the analyst from one perspective at a time while others are held in abeyance

94 (using a technique similar to that of phenomenological bracketing; Ashworth, 1996) or
95 whether the analyst moves flexibly within and between analyses (and if so, how rigour is
96 maintained). Moreover, these decisions are both multiplied and complicated if a team of
97 researchers performs multiple analyses.

98 There is also the danger that analytical pluralism could become a hollow rhetorical
99 device if authors fail to convey a clear argument regarding its value within the specific
100 research project (Chamberlain et al., 2011). Researchers may be tempted to adopt a pluralistic
101 approach because it is perceived as cutting edge or innovative, without duly considering the
102 requirements of their particular research aims or the implications of combining potentially
103 disparate perspectives. Crucially then, researchers must demonstrate whether pluralistic
104 findings can make a significant contribution to psychology. Whereas pluralism might enable
105 insights into phenomena that would not otherwise be possible, it could merely reproduce the
106 outcomes achievable using individual analyses separately – thereby becoming primarily an
107 exercise in illustrating similarities and differences between analytical frameworks. The power
108 of multiple analyses to extend or critique existing knowledge, improve practice, empower or
109 emancipate is as yet undetermined.

110 In summary, analytical pluralism has been increasingly discussed and utilised in
111 recent years. There are several reasons for adopting a pluralistic approach, including: an
112 intention to produce diverse but complementary interpretations of phenomena; an aspiration
113 to do justice to the variety of human expression and/or desire to avoid reductionism; and a
114 wish to access as much as possible within the data. However, there are a number of
115 unresolved tensions and unanswered questions – including issues surrounding
116 commensurability, research quality, contribution to knowledge and the practical application
117 of pluralistic methods – which this meta-study attempts to address. To examine these
118 pertinent issues our research question asked; what can we learn from analytical pluralism in

119 qualitative research?

120 **Method**

121 **Meta-study**

122 Meta-study is a form of research involving the analysis of the theory, methods and
123 findings of qualitative research and the synthesis of these insights into novel ways of thinking
124 about phenomena (Paterson, Thorne, Canam, & Jillings, 2001). As Paterson and her
125 colleagues explain:

126 [M]eta-study represents a discrete and distinct approach to new inquiry based on a
127 critical interpretation of existing qualitative research. It creates a mechanism by which
128 the nature of interpretation is exposed and the meanings that extend well beyond those
129 presented in the available body of knowledge can be generated. As such, it offers a
130 critical, historical, and theoretical analytic approach to making sense of qualitatively
131 derived knowledge (2001, p. 2).

132 Meta-study is the investigation of the results *and* processes of previous research. It is
133 ‘the research of research’. In this study we followed the approach described by Paterson et al.
134 (2001). This involves not only the analysis of primary research results but incorporates
135 reflection on the perspectives and processes involved in those studies. Of principal concern is
136 the critical interpretation and synthesis of existing knowledge of the phenomenon of interest,
137 and the identification of potential directions of future research. We selected a meta-study
138 analysis as it is suitable for synthesising findings produced from diverse research approaches
139 and therefore enabled us to compare and contrast the studies that applied pluralism in
140 different ways, using various analytic methods. It also provided a structure which allowed us
141 to deconstruct the studies we examined and explore the theoretical, methodological and
142 analytic components of the papers to decipher what we could learn from them. This was
143 beneficial given the importance of theory and method for pluralism and the implications of

144 these in the tensions and questions we had identified.

145 Meta-study involves systematic analysis of three components: meta-theory, meta-
146 method, and meta-data analysis (meta-findings). The purpose of these analyses is to reveal
147 similarities and differences between studies and extrapolate new theoretical and practical
148 implications. Meta-theory comprises the study of the theoretical and philosophical
149 perspectives and assumptions underlying the research design. This involved a critical
150 exploration of theoretical frameworks and underlying paradigmatic assumptions which
151 guided each of the studies. We examined how theory was applied within the papers and how
152 this shaped the research question, the choice of methods and construction of findings. Meta-
153 method requires researchers to scrutinise the research design, methodologies and methods
154 adopted within the studies. This meant considering the rigour and epistemological soundness
155 of research and how methods influenced the findings produced. Meta-data analysis is the
156 study of the findings of research. This involved a critical examination and reinterpretation of
157 the analysis and findings presented by the studies. Pluralistic findings were compared across
158 the papers to identify similarities and differences, and interpreted in terms of our research
159 question. Finally, meta-study entails a final synthesis stage which brings together the analysis
160 of theory, methods, and findings to offer new interpretations. For our study this consisted of
161 combining reflections from across the three analyses to identify implications for future
162 pluralistic research.

163 **Search Strategy**

164 A systematic literature search was undertaken by six members of the research team.
165 Studies were primarily identified through searching relevant electronic databases: Web of
166 Science, PsychInfo, PubMed, Science Direct, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The search terms
167 used for each database were ‘polyvocal’, ‘poly AND vocal’, ‘dual analysis’ (dual analy*),
168 ‘multiple analysis’ (multiple analy*), ‘crystallisation’, ‘crystallization’ and ‘pluralism’

169 (pluralis*), with additional searches using hyphenated variants where appropriate. Each
170 search term was utilised twice; initially by itself, then paired with the term ‘qualitative’ to
171 reduce the number of returns on some searches. Inclusion criteria were established and
172 comprised: studies written in English; published in peer reviewed journals; undertaken within
173 the social sciences (including psychology); wholly qualitative in nature; and where one data
174 set had been analysed using more than one qualitative method. The searches were not limited
175 by publication dates. In total, 28 relevant articles were identified as a result of the initial
176 searches. In consideration of the relatively uncommon use of qualitative analytical pluralism
177 (Frost & Nolas, 2013), the articles were deemed sufficient in number and diversity to allow
178 for comparisons to be drawn and for the research question to be answered fully (Paterson et
179 al., 2001).

180 All 28 articles were systematically checked in detail by at least two researchers
181 against the inclusion criteria. Eight duplicates were subsequently identified and discounted.
182 Citation searches were undertaken on all identified articles and reference lists checked for
183 any further studies which met the inclusion criteria. In addition, two key authors from the
184 identified literature were contacted by e-mail and asked to comment on the
185 comprehensiveness of the search results and to suggest further articles not identified as a
186 result of the searches. No additional papers were suggested. The search strategies therefore
187 resulted in a total of 20 relevant articles.

188 **Data Abstraction and Analysis**

189 Data abstraction was directed through the use of a template which facilitated a
190 detailed examination of each article. This allowed salient aspects of the articles to be
191 summarised for further analysis. The template – developed in accordance with the three meta-
192 study components – guided analysis through the following questions:

- 193
- What analyses are employed?

- 194 • Are ontologies and/or epistemologies specified?
- 195 • How does theory inform the paper?
- 196 • How adequately does the paper describe the methods used?
- 197 • Are the analyses/findings adequately supported by data?
- 198 • What discussion is there of the capacity of different methods of analysis to
199 produce different findings?
- 200 • Are the relations/connections between the findings of the different methods of
201 analysis adequately discussed?
- 202 • What limitations does the paper acknowledge?
- 203 • What strengths/weaknesses does the paper have?
- 204 • What are the key findings from this paper in terms of analytical pluralism in
205 qualitative research?

206 Each article was reviewed independently by at least two researchers and through
207 subsequent discussions a joint summary of the analysis was produced for each paper. These
208 summaries were then used to inform our meta-theory, meta-methods, and meta-findings. As a
209 result of this detailed evaluation of the articles and much discussion in group meetings about
210 what constituted evidence of analytical pluralism, a further 10 papers were excluded from this
211 meta-study. For example articles which described the application of a pluralistic approach but
212 did not present an analysis of data were rejected. Notes were kept of each meeting to record
213 our decisions. The selection procedure is summarised in Figure 1.

214 [Figure 1 about here]

215 In conducting the analysis, three members of the research team worked together on
216 producing a meta-theory, two on producing meta-methods, and two on meta-findings, using
217 the article summaries and referring back to the original papers. Regular meetings were held to
218 reflect upon and engage with any presuppositions that may have formed in the process of

219 deciding to undertake a meta-study of qualitative methodological pluralism. Sharing our
220 initial findings with the group strengthened the analysis process as members could offer
221 additional and sometimes alternative interpretations and implications for practice. Although
222 we aimed to minimise the impact of our personal biases on the meta-study, we acknowledge
223 that our analysis and implications are derived from our interpretations of the authors'
224 presentations of pluralistic data. Next, the written analyses were circulated to the entire group
225 for feedback and additional suggestions. Finally we regrouped for further discussion of our
226 observations, conclusions and implications for practice, before collaboratively writing this
227 paper.

228 **Findings and Discussion**

229 **Meta-theory**

230 This section of the study was guided by the questions: how was theory used within the
231 articles; and how were ontological and epistemological concerns addressed? The pluralistic
232 approach was frequently advocated on the basis that complex and varied understandings of
233 phenomena were produced through the application of different analysis methods to data.
234 Analytical pluralism was used by authors to extract as much meaning as possible from the
235 data (Frost, 2009), and to construct holistic, multi-layered understandings, which were deeper
236 than those which one method of analysis could offer alone (Simons, Lathlean, & Squire,
237 2008) and greater than the sum of their parts (Wickens, 2011). For example, authors
238 combined approaches such as thematic and narrative analysis to examine both the content and
239 form of participants' accounts (Savage, 2000; Simons et al., 2008). Other studies employed
240 multiple techniques from discursive psychology to explore the function of participants' talk
241 (Honan, Knobel, Baker, & Davies, 2000; Lyons & Cromby, 2010).

242 It was the adoption of different *theoretical frameworks*, however – not simply
243 different methods of analysis – that produced the most divergent findings within a study. For

244 example, Frost et al.'s (2011) use of phenomenological and discursive analyses, which put
245 different emphasis on agency or structure respectively, illuminated the embodied, gendered
246 and constructed nature of second-time motherhood. Honan et al. (2000, p. 9) illustrated the
247 "constitutive force of theory" by comparing separate interpretations of a corpus of qualitative
248 data using discourse theory, feminist poststructuralism, and ethnomethodology. Although
249 these three approaches shared an interest in language, Honan and colleagues acknowledged
250 that each perspective enabled different 'work' to be done with the data, and demonstrated
251 how they produced contrasting versions of their participant's world; as constituted by
252 discourses, subject positions or interaction. Conversely, Lyons and Cromby (2010) provided
253 an interesting commentary on the extent to which the multiple discursive frames used to
254 explore an extract of a transcript where heightened blood pressure was recorded, reflected
255 different aspects of the embodied nature of social interaction, as the analyses arguably
256 identified varying conceptualisations of the same discursive work. This suggests that research
257 can highlight the multi-dimensional nature of phenomena when theories with divergent
258 assumptions about the social world are employed, and provides our first implication for
259 researchers applying analytical pluralism.

260 Within the sample of papers there was limited discussion of the relationship between
261 paradigmatic assumptions and analytic methods, meaning in some cases it was unclear how
262 paradigmatic tensions had been addressed. Without engaging with the inherent tensions
263 arising from the inclusion of different perspectives with potentially opposing epistemological
264 and ontological assumptions in the same study, pluralistic research can be left open to the
265 challenge of incommensurability. That is, if the philosophical assumptions from contradictory
266 paradigms are mixed indiscriminately, the coherent simultaneous practice of them becomes
267 impossible (Lincoln et al., 2011).

268 Despite this, few of the articles in this study directly addressed the matter of

269 commensurability. Some researchers avoided incoherence by employing analytical
270 techniques underpinned by the same ontological position, for example critical realism
271 (Robinson & Smith, 2010) or expressivist-constructivist theory of language (Simons et al.,
272 2008). These papers subscribed to an epistemological pluralism, where multiple methods of
273 analysis are used to produce different knowledge or perspectives of an object (epistemic
274 project) without implying a statement about the nature of the object (ontological status). This
275 is closely related to what (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 13) referred to as the epistemic fallacy – “that
276 ontological questions can always be reparsed in epistemological form: that is, that statements
277 about being can always be analysed in terms of statements about our knowledge (of being)”.
278 For example, if a narrative analysis is performed for the purpose of gaining knowledge about
279 how stories help people to understand the social world (epistemological) and not for the
280 purpose of imposing the notion that humans are essentially story-telling beings (ontological),
281 other, alternative analyses can also be accommodated.

282 Alternatively, ontological pluralism (although not a position that any of the articles
283 we examined explicitly aligned to) foregrounds the assumption that the nature of existence
284 itself is multiple and plural. This stance rejects the notion that different philosophical
285 positions are fundamentally incompatible and encourages multiple paradigms to be held
286 together dialectically, in order to appreciate various understandings of the phenomena being
287 studied. Endorsing an ontological pluralist perspective, strategies for working with multiple
288 paradigms within a single study have been proposed, including pragmatism (e.g. Biesta,
289 2010), crystallisation (e.g. Ellingson, 2009) and dialectical pluralism (e.g. Johnson &
290 Stefurak, 2014). This may appeal to researchers who feel restricted working within a single
291 paradigm. However, we caution that this position may tacitly encourage the privileging of
292 multiple methods over mono-method studies, and introduce the view that pluralism can be
293 used to access a more accurate representation of reality. Authors of the articles in this study

294 avoided claiming that analytical pluralism was a means of getting closer to a true reality,
295 instead describing that although findings may overlap they represent different emphases of
296 meaning (e.g. Savage, 2000).

297 In light of the theoretical considerations discussed here, we outline two
298 methodological techniques which (in our view) may enable pluralistic researchers who wish
299 to embrace epistemological pluralism to reconcile theoretical tensions. Firstly, bricolage may
300 be a useful tool, as Wickens (2011) illustrated in her investigation of power in written texts.
301 Bricolage involves attempts to “find and develop numerous strategies for getting beyond [the]
302 one dimensionality of single method research” (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004, p. 23) and is
303 perhaps more usually associated with the decomposition of methods than their pluralistic
304 mixing. Wickens (2011) utilised this technique from within an overarching critical,
305 poststructuralist stance (avoiding incoherence) to move dynamically and fluidly between
306 analytic methods, examining the recurring patterns, specific linguistic features and narrative
307 description within the texts, and their interpretive connections. For Wickens, the bricolage
308 approach allowed data to become prism-like, meaning it could be viewed from various angles
309 which each offered a different representation of the data. Here, each prism angle can be
310 considered as producing different forms of knowledge (an epistemological rather than an
311 ontological claim). This was similar to the practice used by Simons et al. (2008, p. 129) of
312 *shifting focus* to analyse interview data from community mental health nurses. This involved
313 “viewing the same object from the same [theoretical] standpoint but adjusting the lens to
314 bring into view particular aspects of the phenomenon”, and highlights another potential
315 technique for researchers aiming to construct multiple ways of knowing. In summary, this
316 distinction between epistemological and ontological pluralism may help ease the concerns of
317 some researchers who may view the issue of commensurability as a barrier to pluralism.

318 Other articles in our study did give consideration to ontological and epistemological

319 concerns, but adequate resolutions were not always reached. When research was located
320 within a particular paradigm, it was sometimes unclear as to whether this was an ontological
321 or epistemological position, or both, meaning it was difficult to determine the nature of the
322 knowledge produced in these studies (e.g. Burck, 2005; Lyons & Cromby, 2010).

323 Frost et al.'s (2011) pluralism mixed constructionist, interpretative, and realist
324 paradigms, arguing that the diversity of human expression cannot be adequately captured by a
325 single framework. To demonstrate the commensurability of approaches, Frost et al. (2011)
326 described the similarities between analyses (e.g. a common focus on language, meaning-
327 making or the identification of themes) and outlined how the findings produced enriched
328 understanding by reflecting different aspects of the same phenomenon. This assumes that if
329 analytic techniques can be made commensurable then paradigms can too, which may not
330 necessarily be the case. A more explicit distinction between analyses and paradigms would
331 have perhaps been useful here. Nonetheless, the authors acknowledged that their research
332 lacked an "interpretative integration of the data" (p. 110), which would have required
333 tensions between the somewhat incommensurate paradigms to be resolved. A fully integrated
334 interpretation of findings was, however, acknowledged by King et al. (2008) as unachievable.
335 Although there was a high degree of similarity between the various phenomenological
336 interpretations of the experience of mistrust, the authors were unable to resolve
337 disagreements arising from conflicting epistemological positions of the researchers. In
338 contrast, Savage (2000) did not seek to amalgamate findings produced from different
339 theoretical stances to avoid the implication that a more accurate representation of the world
340 would result. Instead, Savage proposed that rather than seeing traditions such as realism and
341 post-modernism as opposing, they might be more usefully understood as dialectical or
342 mutually informing, allowing for the "construction of different, and even contrary, versions
343 of the social world" (p. 1495).

344 Our second suggestion for pluralistic researchers is, therefore, to be reflexive toward
345 how various epistemological and ontological positions are to be distinguished between,
346 juxtaposed or creatively combined, in order to explain how knowledge was produced and
347 maintain what Walsh and Koelsch (2012) refer to as structural integrity. Walsh and Koelsch
348 recommend that when combining different approaches, qualitative researchers should
349 explicitly consider how epistemological, methodological, and procedural components adhere.
350 Pluralistic analysis requires “explicating a coherent rationale that considers the question,
351 context, and assumptions that presumably hold the study together” (Walsh & Koelsch, 2012,
352 p. 386).

353 **Meta-methods**

354 In this section we consider how qualitative pluralistic analysis has been performed in
355 practice by exploring: the types of data analysed; the methods of analysis used; the rationales
356 for the choice of methods; the number of analyses conducted; and the ways in which
357 pluralistic analyses were applied.

358 In the studies reviewed, analyses were applied to data from interview texts,
359 ethnographic observations and fictional novels – an encouraging sign that analytical
360 pluralism can be used with a variety of data. Frost et al. (2011) justified selecting an
361 interview transcript for pluralistic analysis on the grounds that the data were “rich in coherent
362 and evolving stories, metaphors, and other linguistic features and included thoughtful self-
363 analysis” (p. 96). Similarly, Simons et al. (2008) explained that the storied nature of the data
364 lent itself to narrative analysis. Although this makes practical sense, we question whether this
365 rationale may marginalise or silence storytellers who are less eloquent or self-reflective;
366 especially when narrative methods are used. The choice of transcription system may also
367 preclude some forms of analysis. For example, conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, &
368 Jefferson, 1974) is best applied when suitable transcription is used. With this in mind, we

369 suggest that researchers might consider the extent to which data is accessible to different
370 analytic techniques at the onset of the research process, so that appropriate data can be
371 collected.

372 Table 1 details the variety of analysis methods employed in the studies we reviewed,
373 illustrating how pluralism was performed using theoretically diverse methods (e.g. grounded
374 theory with discourse analysis; Burck, 2005) or variants of the same analytic approach (e.g.
375 phenomenological methods; King et al., 2008). Earlier we observed that the adoption of
376 different theoretical frameworks produced the most divergent findings. In contrast, Frost
377 (2009) provided an example of how, instead, multiple analyses can be used within the same
378 paradigm to do different things and achieve a more nuanced interpretation of data. Frost
379 (2009) undertook two forms of narrative analysis; the first to identify the temporal structure
380 and features of narratives within the interview; the second to examine meaning within the
381 story and how the narrative was spoken, through a closer analysis of the prosodic and
382 paralinguistic aspects of speech. Presented alongside an analysis of metaphor within the
383 narrative and reflections on the role of the researcher in co-constructing the interview, Frost
384 (2009) offered a detailed insight into the identity work, emotional experience and cultural
385 discourses associated with being a mother. Frost's approach can be contrasted with Robinson
386 and Smith (2010) who used interpretative phenomenological analysis with an interactive
387 model analysis in a composite fashion. As the methods were used principally to organise and
388 synthesise the interview data, there was little variation between the findings produced by the
389 different techniques.

390 [Table 1 about here]

391 Perhaps unsurprisingly, authors provided different rationales for their selection of
392 analytic methods. However, their decisions highlight some noteworthy implications for future
393 research. Most commonly, researchers justified their choice because of the suitability of

394 methods to the research question. For example, Burck's (2005) rationale was rooted in the
395 pragmatic concerns and interests of systemic psychotherapy research. Burck described at
396 length the suitability of approaches for exploring data from family therapy and emphasised
397 how analyses can be used to explore different research questions. In comparison (and as
398 noted above) Simons et al. (2008) described how the storied nature of data prompted the
399 deployment of a narrative analysis. This implies that some preliminary reading of the data
400 must have occurred, and as the influence of the researcher in this initial analysis was
401 inevitable, we suggest that a data-driven rationale for selecting analytic techniques may be
402 problematic.

403 Epistemological fit and similarity between analytical frameworks was also cited as a
404 reason for selecting methods of analysis in pluralistic research. Savage (2000) justified
405 choosing a thematic analysis as it was consistent with a realist perspective and shared a
406 common focus on process and meaning with narrative analysis. Similarly, Robinson and
407 Smith (2010) explicitly presented a comparison of the interpretative phenomenological and
408 interactive model analyses used to highlight the features common to both methods, reflecting
409 the authors' commitment to commensurability.

410 Lastly, the authors of the methodological papers included in this meta-study – which
411 aimed to explicate the capacity of qualitative pluralistic analyses to produce different findings
412 – selected methods that suited the experience of the researchers, primarily for illustrative
413 purposes (Frost et al., 2011; Honan et al., 2000; King et al., 2008). Although this may present
414 a practical solution to the challenge of conducting pluralistic analysis in a research
415 community which tends to be theoretically and methodologically specialised, we would
416 encourage researchers to reflect upon the extent to which their methodological expertise both
417 enables and constrains the research questions that can be addressed. For example, King et al.
418 (2008) provided a useful description of the authors' individual approaches to

419 phenomenological analysis at the end of their paper, enabling the reader to understand how
420 the underlying assumptions and biases of the researchers influenced the analysis.

421 Pluralistic researchers must also decide how many analyses should be performed on a
422 single data set. The articles we studied utilised up to four¹ different techniques, as illustrated
423 in Table 1. Certainly, the potential of pluralism to construct multiple, complex findings may
424 lead researchers to conclude that more analyses are better. Although the practical constraints
425 of this are clear, we would also encourage researchers to reflect upon whether there can be
426 too many ways to helpfully examine a phenomenon. The assumption that more analyses are
427 better comes with a risk of producing complicated findings without saying anything of real
428 consequence; that is, with no significant implications for either theory or practice. Thoughtful
429 construction of pluralistic research questions may help researchers to negotiate this balance.
430 Overall, rationales for choosing which analytic methods to include (and how many) in
431 pluralistic studies were both theoretical and practical. The foremost consideration for future
432 pluralist researchers is perhaps then, that analyses offer a coherent fit with the research
433 question and philosophical assumptions of the study.

434 Across the articles in this meta-study, the explanation of how methods of analysis
435 were applied varied. In some studies, methodological procedures were described in detail
436 (e.g. Savage, 2000; Simons et al., 2008), whereas in others the analysis process was less
437 transparent. In light of the growing interest of pluralistic analysis in psychology (Frost &
438 Nolas, 2011), we recommend that sufficient detail of methodological procedures are reported,
439 to enable readers to understand how to undertake multiple analyses and how knowledge was
440 produced. For pluralistic research to demonstrate rigour – a widely accepted criterion for
441 judging the quality of qualitative research (e.g. Tracy, 2010; Yardley, 2000) – providing
442 adequate description of the procedures used to select, transform and organise data in the
443 research paper is advisable. Specifically, we were concerned that in the two studies that used

444 grounded theory analysis, it was not made clear whether a full or abbreviated version of the
445 method was applied (Willig, 2013). Indeed, we would question whether a full grounded
446 theory (i.e. using the techniques of theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation) is
447 achievable with analysis of a single interview transcript.

448 In practice, pluralistic analysis was performed by researchers in a variety of ways. In
449 four studies a single researcher analysed a data set in multiple ways (Burck, 2005; Frost,
450 2009; Savage, 2000; Wickens, 2011), whereas three papers used at least two researchers to
451 undertake multiple analyses together (Lyons & Cromby, 2010; Robinson & Smith, 2010;
452 Simons et al., 2008). Others used a team of researchers to independently analyse a data set
453 each in a different way (Honan et al., 2000), or independently followed by a group cross-
454 analysis (Frost et al., 2011; King et al., 2008).

455 Each approach arguably entailed a different set of advantages and challenges. Using a
456 team of researchers to independently analyse a data set meant that others with expertise in
457 different analytic techniques were able to contribute to projects. However, King et al. (2008)
458 discussed the difficulties involved in the group process of producing a consensual analysis,
459 reflecting that unresolved tensions were derived from researchers' different epistemological
460 positions. Reflecting on their involvement in the analysis process, Frost et al. (2010; 2011)
461 felt that focusing on an interview text alone allowed for a fresh perspective. Conversely,
462 others described feeling removed from the interview process, noting how they would have
463 conducted the interview in a manner more aligned to their analytical approach. Using
464 different researchers may enhance the diversity of interpretations, as each researcher brings
465 their own subjective stance to the data. However without a group cross-analysis process,
466 findings may remain separate and disconnected rather than offering fluid, dynamic
467 understandings of the research topic.

468 For the individual researcher undertaking pluralistic analysis, the ordering of

469 analytical approaches must be considered. Analyses were performed sequentially or
470 simultaneously by researchers, but little attention was given to the interaction between
471 methods. It may be possible (for example) that the first analysis could obscure alternative
472 meanings that might have been available had another analysis been undertaken initially.

473 In articles where analytic techniques were explicitly applied in sequence, some
474 authors acknowledged the influence of the initial analysis in shaping their later
475 interpretations. Frost (2009) used the transcript and her experience of the interview to be
476 guided sequentially from one analytical perspective to another, and described how this
477 approach allowed for a shift in perspective when she recognised a point of interest in the data.
478 Lyons and Cromby (2010) used elevated blood pressure readings to direct them to a
479 particular section of interview text, but discussed whether in the absence of physiological
480 data, they would have still arrived at the same section of the transcript. Using multiple
481 analyses simultaneously, Wickens (2011) described using a triple-entry journal to record
482 excerpts of data, analytic ideas and personal responses to texts. This allowed her to move
483 fluidly from one analytic method to another and attend to the connections between both
484 critical and reflexive interpretations of the texts. We suggest, therefore, that pluralistic
485 researchers working independently reflect upon how analytic methods are sequenced or how
486 simultaneous analysis should be approached.

487 A challenge facing all pluralistic researchers is how the personal subjectivity and
488 biography of the analyst(s) influences the research process. Chamberlain et al. (2011)
489 suggested that “adopting multiple methods and using them creatively and critically demands
490 and promotes reflexive engagement with every aspect of the research practice” (p. 166). If
491 pluralism requires researchers to shift between theoretical perspectives in order to represent
492 the multi-dimensional nature of phenomena, it may be necessary for researchers to reflect
493 upon their own proclivities. Reflexivity was addressed in five papers (and in a companion

494 paper to Frost et al., 2011; Frost et al., 2010). Exploring the researcher's role in constructing
495 interview dialogue was one way in which authors demonstrated reflexivity. King et al. (2008)
496 attended to the researcher's embodied experience of empathy during the interview, and Burck
497 (2005) and Frost (2009) provided examples of how the interviewer had influenced the
498 direction of the discussion by closing down or opening up certain topics. Frost (2009), in fact,
499 explicitly used this reflexive analysis as a method of producing an additional layer of
500 understanding.

501 Working with multiple data sources, Wickens (2010) used journal entries to reflect on
502 how interpretations were formed and Honan et al. (2000) highlighted how different
503 theoretical approaches oriented analysts toward certain types of data to build their case, and
504 questioned the extent to which the findings reflected their participant or the analyst and their
505 chosen perspective. Frost et al. (2010) also compared the impact of individual researchers on
506 the production of findings, noting that the analyst's level of experience and epistemological
507 stance influenced their use of language. Some analysts distanced themselves from their role
508 in the interpretative process by selecting to write in the third person, and those with relatively
509 less experience tended to use a "more authoritative voice" in their accounts than the
510 "tentative" language used by others (Frost et al., 2010, p. 457). The examples of reflexivity
511 provided in these studies illustrate how analytical pluralism invites and encourages
512 researchers to reflect upon their role in constructing data and subsequent (multiple)
513 interpretations and, as Frost et al. (2010) proposed, may provide a starting point for
514 enhancing transparency and trustworthiness in research.

515 **Meta-findings**

516 For the final part of the meta-study we examined the findings produced by qualitative
517 pluralistic analysis, by considering the findings that were presented, the ways authors
518 interpreted them, and their utility and value for psychology.

519 By adopting a pluralistic approach the papers in this meta-study produced multiple,
520 diverse understandings of the research topics under investigation. However, how authors
521 presented their findings varied, demonstrating the flexible nature of analytical pluralism.
522 Eight of the articles we reviewed presented separate findings for each analytic technique
523 used, which enabled comparisons to be drawn between the interpretations (albeit in different
524 ways, discussed below). Robinson and Smith (2010) produced fully integrated findings from
525 a combined analysis, and uniquely King et al. (2008) presented findings from a combined
526 analysis as well as separate interpretations from each analyst.

527 How authors selected their data inevitably influenced the findings that were produced.
528 Multiple interpretations of the same piece of data were presented by Frost et al. (2011),
529 Lyons and Cromby (2010) and Savage (2000), allowing the reader to directly compare the
530 interpretations derived from each perspective. Alternatively, other authors selected different
531 extracts of data to illustrate findings, choosing either different sections of the same interview
532 transcript (King et al., 2008), or selecting data from across a variety of sources (Burck, 2005;
533 Honan et al., 2000; Simons et al., 2008; Wickens, 2011). Honan et al. explained that using
534 different data to represent findings from separate analyses was necessary, as each approach
535 “works with its own vocabulary... and calls on different orders of evidence for its claims to
536 adequacy” (2000, p. 30); thus highlighting how pluralism can enhance transparency in the
537 research process.

538 The selection of data and presentation of findings determined the comparisons that
539 could be made between the multiple and potentially divergent interpretations; providing a
540 further implication for pluralistic researchers. Authors compared and contrasted the findings
541 produced by pluralistic analysis in several ways, ranging from a standalone discussion of
542 each analysis to a fully integrated presentation of several interpretations. Burck (2005) and
543 Savage (2000) offered little or no comparisons between findings, with interpretations

544 standing side by side, but discussed separately. Exploring how pluralistic analysis could be
545 used to build up layers of meaning, Frost (2009), Lyons and Cromby (2010) and Simons et al.
546 (2008) conducted analyses in a sequential manner. An initial analysis was performed to
547 identify meaning in the data, which then guided the subsequent analyses. In this way,
548 findings were connected by a common feature or meaning in the data.

549 In contrast to constructing meaning sequentially, some authors worked *across*
550 findings, comparing explicitly the different interpretations from each analysis. Different
551 findings were shown on occasion to contradict others (Honan et al. 2000), produce similar
552 interpretations (for example when the same text was drawn upon to illustrate related themes;
553 Frost et al., 2011), or even highlight both converging and diverging interpretations of the
554 phenomenon under study (King et al., 2008). In these three papers, the capacity of pluralistic
555 analysis to produce multiple possibilities for understanding was demonstrated through the
556 comparisons between interpretations, as each finding was considered to reflect a different
557 aspect of the same phenomenon (Frost et al., 2011). For example, Honan et al. (2000)
558 concluded their article by pulling together the various versions of their participant that were
559 made available by the different perspectives, commenting that “our interest definitely is not
560 in which is right or better but rather in when each one could be useful and for what purpose”
561 (p. 30). This suggests that findings from pluralistic analysis have the potential to be
562 accessible to a diverse audience, as the most relevant interpretation to the reader can be
563 extracted (Frost & Nolas, 2013).

564 Furthermore, presenting different readings of qualitative data together allowed for
565 multiple possibilities of being to be constructed, rather than limiting participants to an
566 ‘either/or’ ontological status. Frost et al. (2011) presented their participant as a
567 phenomenological, realist and postmodern agent, recognising that this may change fluidly
568 depending on her context and situation. Similarly, Honan et al. (2000) described assigning

569 different powers and discursive resources to their participant, by constructing contrasting
570 versions of her social world. It therefore appears that when multiple interpretations are treated
571 with equal significance, analytical pluralism offers researchers the potential to honour the
572 complexity of participants' lives and avoid what Bakhtin (1984 [1963]) referred to as
573 'finalising' what any individual or group is, or could become.

574 The final approach was to pursue an integrated synthesis of findings, where it was less
575 clear as to how each form of analysis contributed to the findings produced (King et al., 2008;
576 Robinson & Smith, 2010; Wickens, 2011). Wickens (2011) argued that the overall emphasis
577 of her bricolage approach was on creating "a combined picture [that] provides such a rich and
578 evocative depiction that is more than the sum of its parts" (p. 161). Presenting a combined
579 interpretation meant that any inconsistencies or contradictions between findings were
580 overlooked, with the exception of King et al. (2008) who discussed the separate
581 interpretations produced by individual analysts alongside the integrated synthesis. This
582 approach provided a detailed, idiographic account of the embodied, relational experience of
583 mistrust and enabled the reader to see how the individual phenomenological interpretations
584 varied, depending on the extent to which the analyst considered the participant's words to
585 reflect their reality.

586 In view of the capacity of analytical pluralism to construct complex, multi-layered
587 understandings of the phenomena we study in psychology, an advantage of this approach may
588 be that research questions can be tackled from multiple perspectives. By embracing the
589 diversity (and limitations) of what different analyses can do, researchers were able to address
590 different research questions related to the same topic concurrently (e.g. Burck, 2005). A
591 fundamental aim of research is to produce findings which contribute to knowledge. However,
592 as many of the papers included in this meta-study declared methodological aims, it was
593 difficult to judge whether studies using pluralism made a significant contribution to

594 knowledge in their respective areas of research. Six articles did not relate the findings
595 produced back to existing knowledge of the topic under investigation. Of the remaining
596 papers, Frost (2009) generated future avenues for research and Simons et al. (2008) provided
597 implications for nursing practice. Robinson and Smith (2010) proposed a model for
598 understanding the process of early adult psychological crisis, and Lyons and Cromby (2010)
599 discussed how discursive analysis may be combined with blood pressure data in order to
600 develop a more embodied analysis in social psychology. These examples highlight how
601 analytical pluralism can suggest future directions for research, produce implications for
602 practice, build theory and develop methodological techniques.

603 However, we suggest that it is the comparison drawn *between* different interpretations
604 that can offer something more to research in psychology than perhaps traditional mono-
605 methodological studies can. Whether meaning is built up sequentially from an initial theme,
606 or derived from comparisons across findings, this form of interpretation encourages
607 researchers to engage with the creative tensions that arise when different perspectives on the
608 same phenomenon are brought together within a particular study and emphasises “learning
609 from difference” (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 686). Moreover, the contrasting of perspectives can
610 avoid a type of pluralistic methodolatry – the privileging of multiple methods in the belief
611 that two or more are better than one – by focusing on how different interpretations may both
612 converge and diverge in their understanding of the research topic of study. Ultimately,
613 analytical pluralism should be more than simply a parade of the various methods available to
614 us; it should be used creatively and productively to advance knowledge in psychology.

615 **Conclusions and Implications for Future Research**

616 Through this meta-study of qualitative analytical pluralism, we have closely examined
617 the use of theory, application of methods and construction of findings in studies which have
618 utilised more than one method of qualitative data analysis to explore meaning within a single

619 data set. Analytical pluralism enables researchers to produce rich, varied understandings of
620 phenomena, and opens up multiple possibilities for interpretation because it avoids
621 privileging any particular approach or framework over another. This form of pluralism can
622 offer alternative and interesting ways of approaching psychological research questions.

623 Alongside these advantages, the application of multiple data analysis methods
624 presents challenges for researchers to negotiate. From our analysis of the papers in this study,
625 we suggest that analytical pluralism can be used to highlight the multi-dimensional nature of
626 phenomena when perspectives with divergent assumptions about the social world are
627 employed. This requires researchers to clarify and distinguish between their epistemological
628 and ontological positions and illustrate how their research maintains “structural integrity”
629 (Walsh & Koelsch, 2012). That is, researchers need to find ways to demonstrate coherent
630 links between theory, method and findings and explain how findings produced from multiple
631 analyses can remain commensurate or complementary. Our distinction between
632 epistemological pluralism and ontological pluralism may be useful here, together with
633 techniques such as bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001; 2005) or shifting focus (Simons et al., 2008),
634 which allow for different ways of knowing to be constructed within a consistent ontological
635 perspective. Alternatively, approaches like dialectical pluralism (e.g. Johnson & Stefurak,
636 2014) offer ways of interacting with paradigmatic tensions.

637 Although the articles in this meta-study did not explicitly discuss the issue of quality
638 in pluralism, there were examples of ways in which authors sought to ensure rigour in
639 research. By engaging in reflexivity, researchers described an awareness and critique of their
640 role in constructing data and multiple interpretations, suggesting that a pluralist approach
641 may be used to enhance transparency and trustworthiness in research (Frost, 2011; Frost et
642 al., 2010). Working with multiple analytic frames enabled authors to be sensitive to
643 polyvocality and to represent the variety and multiplicity of perspectives within their data.

644 This avoided finalizing participants' accounts, an ethical concern for researchers. Comparing
645 the papers in this study also reinforced the importance of reporting qualitative methodological
646 procedures in sufficient detail. Although this is not an issue unique to pluralistic studies, we
647 advise that researchers using this approach provide adequate description of the techniques
648 used to select, transform and organise data in their research, in order to demonstrate rigour.
649 Considering the variation in how pluralistic analysis was performed in the papers we
650 reviewed, we err towards suggesting that studies are judged on their individual merits and
651 limitations. Therefore, scholars may wish to consider adapting their criteria for what
652 constitutes good research when evaluating individual pluralistic studies, as universal
653 indicators may not be appropriate (see Smith & Deemer, 2000 for a discussion of the
654 problematic nature of fixed criteria). Tracy (2010), for example, proposed eight common end
655 goals of strong research (including rigour, credibility and meaningful coherence) rather than
656 universal criteria for the practice of qualitative research, which may be more suitable for
657 judging the quality of pluralistic research.

658 The purpose of this meta-study was to address the question: what can we learn from
659 analytical pluralism in qualitative research? On the basis of our analysis, we conclude that
660 pluralism has the potential to contribute to knowledge production; in particular through an
661 exploration of the tensions that arise from combining different perspectives within the same
662 study. Potentially, it is the comparisons drawn between interpretations that can offer
663 something more to research in psychology, not least through promoting a reflexive critique of
664 "the social and intellectual unconscious embedded in the analytic tools and operations used"
665 (Johnson, Long & White, 2000, p. 248). Indeed, for pluralistic research, the differences
666 between findings may be more relevant than the similarities. There is however, a caveat to
667 this. Although not a position adopted by any of the authors of the papers in this meta-study,
668 we caution against a view that places multiple methods of analysis in a hierarchy above

669 traditional mono-method studies. Certainly, the articles we reviewed have begun to illustrate
670 the capacity of pluralism to produce interesting, polyvocal, sometimes diverging meanings
671 from the same data set, but this does not mean that mono-methodological work is not also
672 valuable. As Kincheloe (2001) warns, pluralist researchers must resist complicity in
673 knowledge production designed to regulate and discipline, as must those advocating mono-
674 methodological approaches. Instead, we advise that when research questions are carefully
675 constructed, rationales for a pluralist approach and selection of methods are presented, and
676 implications of decisions made in the practical application of pluralism are considered, that
677 analytical pluralism offers a welcome addition to the qualitative researcher's toolbox.

678 **End Notes**

679 ¹ We were unable to judge how many forms of phenomenological analysis were performed
680 by King et al. (2008), as although three separate individual commentaries were presented,
681 five analysts conducted individual interpretations and six contributed to the consensual
682 analysis.

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