

Analytical Pluralism: An application to the exploration of adult attachment

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Introduction

This chapter introduces and discusses analytical pluralism, using as illustration a case study to explore adult attachment during the transition to second-time parenthood (Bailey-Rodriguez, 2017). It begins by introducing pluralistic qualitative research and then discusses the value of analytical pluralism in researching attachment. Study design and analyses are presented, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings and the benefits and challenges of using pluralistic approaches.

Pluralistic Qualitative Research and Analytical Pluralism

Pluralistic qualitative research (PQR) combines methods of data collection (methodological pluralism) and/or qualitative analyses of the same data set (analytical pluralism) to address complex research questions. Methodological pluralism allows for collection of different forms of data, whilst analytical pluralism allows for different questions to be asked of data. PQR argues that single method use is constrained by philosophical underpinnings, and so, whilst providing rich insight, can only do so from one perspective. PQR advocates that that human experience and behaviour can be understood as multidimensional, fragmentary, and at times, (apparently) contradictory. It can combine ontologies and epistemologies to gain multiple insights and perspectives. When findings reached through pluralistic research are integrated, diverse forms of knowledge are generated (Clarke et al., 2015), and multi-layered insight to meanings of human experience gained.

PQR regards realities and existence as multiple (Johnson, 2015) and understands human behaviour and identity construction to vary with context. It advocates minimal reduction of data and an openness to diversity in the findings. This requires researchers to consider philosophical underpinnings of each analysis brought to the research, and to make clear the status of each in the study. In turn this enhances reflexive awareness and the quality of the

study. Rather than seeing different epistemologies as mutually exclusive, PQR sees epistemological and ontological combinations as dialectical and mutually informing (Clarke et al., 2015). Thus apparent inconsistencies and tensions in analyses are held lightly together with the aim of accessing multiple insights that can contribute to more holistic understandings. Gaps and divergences arising from the analyses are recognised and highlighted rather than discarded or treated as outliers (Frost & Nolas, 2011). Additionally, the researcher is freed from methodological limits on the interrogation of the data. Crucially, the allowance for multi-ontological and epistemological stances and tensions enables a move away from an ‘either/or’ to a ‘both/and’ position (Frost & Nolas, 2011), enabling assumptions and taken for granted knowledge in existing research to be challenged. This is valuable when, for example, research topics do not have ontological consensus (e.g. Steffen & Coyle, 2011), or stakeholders have different interests or contested meanings (e.g. Frost & Nolas, 2013). The choice of each method and analysis brought to the study must be justified, both in relation to the research question it is asking and, in its status and integration with other methods. Integrating the findings addresses the study’s overarching research question.

It is argued that by analysing the data in this manner and acknowledging ‘experiential loose ends’ (Gabb, 2009), the messiness, uncertainties and contradictions of human experience and behaviour are more closely represented (Frost et al., 2011). The retention of messiness in the representation of findings reflects the complexity of experiences; loose ends do not mean frayed ends (Rodriguez & Frost, 2015).

In the next section we discuss the benefits of using analytic pluralism to research adult attachment, using a recent study to illustrate the application.

Analytical Pluralism and Attachment Research

Attachment theory is concerned with the establishment of close relational bonds, how emotions become regulated within those bonds, and the mental organisation and representation of relationships and affect. It provides a framework for understanding how individuals form close relationships, first as children and later as adults (Bifulco & Thomas, 2013).

The attachment system activates certain *attachment behaviours* when an individual feels threatened or distressed; the goal is to achieve *proximity* to a preferred person, an *attachment figure*, for comfort. The attachment figure serves as a *safe haven* (Bowlby, 1979). In childhood this figure tends to be the parent or carer. In adulthood, when in an intimate relationship, it tends to be a romantic partner (Howe, 2011).

Once proximity has been achieved, the attachment system switches ‘off’ and the individual can then use the attachment figure as a *secure base* from which to explore and engage with the environment. Consequently, how well attachment relationships can fulfil these safe haven and secure base functions are translated into relationship representations of these interactional patterns, known as *internal working models* (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). These mental representations integrate beliefs and expectations about the self, others, and the social world in general; they are constructions of how the world has worked in the past and guide expectations of how it might work in the future.

Based on these, individuals develop and organise their attachment behavioural strategies during times of need in ways that seek to increase the availability and responsiveness of their attachment figure. Differences in attachment strategies develop from individuals’ sensitivity, consistency, availability, and responsiveness during times of need. These individual differences tend to be categorised broadly into three attachment styles: secure attachment, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment (Howe, 2011).

Adult attachment is most commonly researched using quantitative methods, which because of their positivist underpinnings lead to, or assume, the categorisation of individuals into attachment styles (e.g. Freeman & Brown, 2001). These studies highlight the ability to generalise and make predictions (e.g. Feeney & Noller, 1990) and to compare how those with different attachment styles respond to different situations (e.g. Gallo & Smith, 2001; Mikulincer, 1995). However, some studies have shown that changes in attachment behaviours can vary with context (e.g. Alexandrov et al., 2005; Clulow, 2001), and that attachment style can be regarded as a multi-dimensional construct, simultaneously characterised by levels of security, avoidance and anxiety (Alexandrov et al., 2005). Johnson (2003) has suggested that attachment styles can be thought of as being on a continuous spectrum that allows variation in response to, for example, stress or threat. The dominance of this understanding of attachment means that where qualitative approaches are used, it is usually with the assumption that attachment styles are fixed, and commonly focusses on the ways in which different attachment styles influence relationships, including intimate, authoritative and psychotherapeutic (e.g. Allison et al., 2008; Burke et al., 2016; Dallos & Smart, 2011).

Research into attachment in couples who become parents has similarly assumed categorisation. Although the transition to first-time parenthood has been investigated extensively, there are few studies which examine the transition to second-time parenthood. Couple relationship quality tends to decline when couples become parents, however this decline continues with additional children (Belsky et al., 1983), illustrating the importance of exploring couple relationship attachment when parents have more than one child. Nevertheless, no qualitative studies that explore attachment in second-time parenthood have been found, despite existing research challenging the inherent assumption that second-time parenthood is a linear progression from first-time parenthood with identity remaining fixed (e.g. Frost, 2006; Rodrigues & Rebelo-Botelho, 2021). The few studies investigating second-

time parenthood more generally have mainly focused on motherhood to the exclusion of the couple relationship (e.g. Frost, 2006; Munn, 1991; O'Reilly, 2004).

PQR allows complex questions to be asked about how individuals describe, construct, and manifest their attachment behaviours during meaningful life events, such as second-time parenthood. It can inquire not only into how participants make sense of their attachment behaviours but also into how the behaviours, and changes in these, can be understood from other perspectives and used to explain variations in attachment. By adopting an interpretivist approach to researching attachment, a framework within which to understand subjective experience, meaning-making and identity construction in the development of the self can be utilised. The wide range of qualitative methods available allows emphasis to be placed on language, visual, embodied and other manifestations of experience, and different forms of analysis used to enable insight from different perspectives. Single method use can provide in-depth insight by for example using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore lived experience (Smith, 2009) to ask e.g. 'What is it like to experience varying patterns of attachment?'; using discursive psychology to explore the use of language (Wiggins, 2016) to ask e.g. 'What strategies are used by couples to negotiate different attachment styles?'; or using thematic analysis to find patterns of meaning in accounts of experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to ask e.g. 'What patterns of meaning are present in accounts about attachment behaviour?' However, given the focus in existing research on the fixed nature of attachment styles, a pluralistic approach has the benefit of allowing for different questions to be asked simultaneously as a first step in exploring attachment as variable and dynamic. Consideration of the influence of relational and temporal contexts will contribute to the research field of adult attachment and be useful to practitioners.

In a study of attachment behaviours across the transition to second-time parenthood we applied an analytical pluralistic approach, combining narrative analysis (Labov, 1972) to ask ‘What do stories about attachment behaviour tell us about patterns of attachment?’, and psycho-social readings of the data to ask: ‘What can these stories tell us of the relationship between participants’ internal self and their external world?’ Together they addressed the complex research question: ‘How do narrators construct their attachment behaviours and how are these informed by relationships between internal and external worlds?’

In the next section we outline this study to show how the use of analytical pluralism can explore fluctuations in adult attachment of a mother having a second child.

Using analytical pluralism to explore attachment behaviours during the transition to second-time parenthood

The illustration below is taken from a longitudinal case with a married heterosexual couple expecting and then having their second child. The case study approach was chosen to allow for analyses that were deeper than broad, and the study was longitudinal so that changes in behaviour and their meanings could be considered over 18 months in the significant, but often overlooked, life event of transitioning to second-time parenthood (Frost, 2006). The study enquired into the influences on each partner’s sense of self, *and* on their couple relationship by exploring how these dynamics change and interact through the transition to second-time parenthood.

In the following sections we focus on data collected from the mother, Claire, at the start of the study to show how they were analysed using narrative analysis and a psycho-social reading.

The Participants

The participants were in the third trimester of their second pregnancy when the study began. The couple were chosen as their 5-year marriage provided opportunity for each to reflect, together and individually, on changes in their attachment behaviours with the arrival of the first and then second child.

Claire was a 27-year-old woman at the time of the first phase of data collection, pregnant with her second child, and a full-time stay-at-home mother. Her first child, Shane, was aged 4 at the start of the study. Claire was the fourth of five children, who described having had a difficult childhood and relationship with her parents, especially her mother. She felt abandoned and being left to cope on her own during stressful situations. Claire was estranged from her family in her teenage years, but now has an existing although strained relationship with her mother.

Data Collection

The study comprised four phases of data collection, starting in the third trimester of the pregnancy. Individual Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM; Wengraf, 2001) interviews were conducted with each participant to elicit life stories to provide a macro context for subsequent semi-structured interviews focusing on the transition to second-time parenthood. These interviews drew on the Attachment Style Interview (ASI; Bifulco & Thomas, 2013) to elicit information about current attachment behaviours and meanings of close relationships for the participants. Additionally, participants were asked to bring photos to joint unstructured photo-elicitation interviews, both as alternative expressions of meanings of their experience and as a way of providing them with greater agency in choosing events of significance to them. They also kept diaries between interviews to capture daily experiences.

Methods of Analyses

Narrative analysis (Labov, 1972) and psycho-social readings (Roseneil, 2006) were used to analyse the written data and spoken accounts in a sequential analytical pluralistic approach. Both analyses were considered to be of equal status.

We were interested in how the participants subjectively constructed their identities in and outside of the relationship, through the stories they told about their transition to second-time parenthood (narrative analysis), and what these stories told us about the participants' relationship between their inner emotional world and the external world they inhabit (psycho-social reading). By combining these methods, the complex research question about how attachment behaviours can fluctuate and change with context could be addressed. The photographs were not analysed, being used only to generate stories and accounts of aspects of daily life and relationships that the participants deemed to be significant (Rose, 2012).

The relativist ontological stance underpinning the study sees realities as multiple, and the analyses combine social constructionist and interpretivist epistemologies. Social constructionist epistemology regards knowledge as co-created through interaction (Burr, 2015). Interpretivist epistemology regards the social world to be understood only through unobservable structures that cause observable events (Hollway, 2011). Thus, by combining these epistemologies, knowledge generated is on assumptions that attachment, based on internal working models (Howe, 2011), are understood from unique participant perspectives told through co-constructed stories of attachment behaviours. Attachment theory framework, subjective meaning making, and relationships between the participants' internal and external worlds could all be considered. Meanings are understood both from the stories themselves and what they might say about relationships between the participant's external world and underlying emotional dynamics.

Narrative analysis

Different models of narrative analysis focus on different aspects of stories and their telling to understand how identity is constructed. In this study, the interest was in identifying stories that allow access to how the participants make sense of their attachment behaviours, and which could be further analysed from a psycho-social perspective to give insight to their relationships with the external world. Labov's (1972) model of structural narrative analysis identifies stories within accounts through their temporal ordering; stories are structured to maintain listeners' interest with a series of questions. A relativist ontological and contextualist social constructionist epistemological stance emphasised knowledge generated from local, provisional and situational contexts (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988, as cited in Madill et al., 2000). This allowed analysis that would explore both how these participants perceived different contexts, and how they drew on them to construct and reconstruct their identities and attachment behaviours in the stories they told.

Therefore, with this model, the following questions could be asked:

- How does each partner (re)construct their attachment behaviours through the ways they tell stories about them?
- How do the stories each partner tells (re)construct attachment behaviours within the couple relationship?
- How do the stories the couple partners narrate together co-construct attachment behaviours within their relationship?

Once narratives were identified within the transcript, analytical notes about the function each question played in constructing the story were used to interpret the narratives in the context of the entire interview (Bailey-Rodriguez et al., 2019).

Psycho-social readings

Following the narrative analysis of each interview, psycho-social readings of the same accounts were carried out using attachment-based psychoanalytic concepts and principles. Internal and external worlds are regarded as overlapping and reciprocally constituting. Understanding the complex interchange between the internal psychic world and the external social world of the participants (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008) provides accounts of both internality and agency (Roseneil, 2006). The psycho-social analysis therefore gave understanding of how the participants made sense of their manifesting attachment behaviours, particularly in terms of their emotional and social interactions with the world.

Critical realist and interpretivist stances were adopted to go beyond the text and treat external activity as a means of understanding participants' unobservable, internal motivational processes. The existence of underlying mental structures which inform thought and behaviour were assumed but accessed using interpretation to reveal the hidden underlying processes (Willig, 2012). By understanding attachment behaviours described in the stories as expressions of underlying emotional dynamics, the psycho-social readings sought to illuminate the constant interplay between internal working models and attachment behaviours in both personal and relational contexts. Grounding the readings in attachment-based psychoanalytical concepts was further supported with the elicitation of participants' biographical and relational histories (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013), obtained through the BNIM interviews.

The psycho-social readings therefore asked:

- What does each partner's account of their attachment behaviours reveal about their internal working models, and the interplay between these?
- What do the joint accounts of attachment behaviours within the couple relationship reveal about each partner's internal working models in interaction?

An analytical approach similar to the one developed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) was applied. The initial descriptive step considered the text at face value to address what the experiences were and how they were talked about. The text was then re-read, and line-by-line notes were made about the form of the data, including the articulated description, and explanations of meanings, behaviours and relationships. The emotionality embedded in what was said was also attended to by examining the speech, noticing emotional tone, long pauses, avoidances, metaphors, digressions, contradictions, and inconsistencies. Using field notes and the participant's biographical interview, questions were asked about why participants might construct particular meanings and what underlying motivations this might point to.

The analysis was written up to explain identified themes in an account of the emotional and psychological dynamics that may underpin the participants' narratives.

Combining the narrative analysis and the psycho-social readings

The application of these two analytical methods to the same data allowed for a focus on how participants made meaning of their attachment behaviours (narrative analysis) and on how the behaviours were informed by psychological processes and dynamics of inner reality. Together they highlighted dynamic and nuanced processes, with each method permitting insight into different dimensions.

Combining contextualist social constructionism, critical realism and attachment-based psychoanalytic concepts allowed for knowledge to be generated from perspectives that included local and situational contexts, psychological and social dynamics, and the assumptions of internal working models that vary with these influences. Considering the findings within an ontology that regards realities as multiply constructed, and adopting an interpretivist paradigm, meant that convergences and divergences across the findings were of

equal status, contributing to a more holistic picture of the meanings of attachment behaviours in different contexts and from different perspectives.

In the next section, selected findings from Claire's first individual semi-structured interview are discussed (see Bailey-Rodriguez, 2017, for further details).

Illustration of findings

Narrative analysis findings

Table 1 below shows a structural narrative analysis of one of Claire's narratives.

Table 1

Claire's story about self-care

A:	D: can you tell me, what do you do when you experience umm either difficulties, feelings of stress or distress? What do you do?
O:	C: I think my initial reaction... is... because it was like hardwired into me is just shut down and pre- just get angry...
E:	cos anger is like a secondary emotion, like it's a a reaction to fear...
CA:	but now I'm able- I actually recognise when that process is starting to happen and if I see that working inside my head and I feel that... I think oh! no! ok I'm stressed I need to... have a bath, I need to watch a rubbish film or I need to... see Jack and we need to talk about it or I need to write something...
E:	so I try to- I try to really have a lot of self-care when those things come up because if I don't then I sort of spiral into my old established patterns and get really shut down and really angry and really closed off
R:	<i>(low tone)</i> and that doesn't work out so well

This analysis illustrates Claire's understanding of her emotional reactions to difficult situations. She sets the scene saying that shutting down and getting angry is a difficult behaviour to change. This is followed with an understanding of why this may be, which conveys Claire's awareness of what her typical response might mean. The events and Evaluation together function to express what the alternative strategies are in comparison to how Claire describes herself as typically reacting. She acknowledges and demonstrates how much things have changed for the better; this appears to be an active and conscious process which takes an effort to make.

The significance of the story is to describe what Clare thinks would happen if she did not engage with her coping strategies, constructing her as someone who continually exerts self-awareness and active coping behaviours to avoid reverting back to typical reactions to difficult experiences. This is stressed in the narrative's outcome of "*that doesn't work out so well*", and although no details are offered as to what that looks like, Claire constructs her typical reaction as exacerbating the situation:

because if it's in my head, I'll just... it'll drive me crazy, I'll make it a bigger thing than it is, I'll turn it in- cos my brain is amazingly efficient at... taking something innocuous and... using paranoia to weave it into the world is ending!

and that allowing these "*hardwired*" feelings to arise will be immensely distressing.

Elsewhere in the interview, Claire says she is "*at the point in my life where I ff- I can finally say to someone 'I'm really stressed... so bla bla bla bla bla' rather than just going off and screaming and whatever... and taking it out on other people*", constructing her past sense of self as not being in control of her feelings and consequent behaviour. In contrast, Claire constructs her present sense of self as someone who *is* in control of her feelings and behaviour and feels secure enough to express this to others.

This account serves to characterise Claire as someone able to both recognise and manage undesirable feelings that would manifest in automatic out-of-control behaviours as a response to stressful situations.

Analysis of another narrative considers this in relation to her husband, Jack, and when Claire is caring for her child on her own.

Table 2

Claire's narrative about coping on her own but falling apart around others

A:	D: can you tell me about a time when you were on your own and feeling distress?
O:	C: Jack was at work
CA:	and Shane fell and hit his head and he had sort of like had a fit and I had to call A&E or the ambulance, and we had to go to the A&E
O:	and I was on my own for that and Jack showed up later
R:	and it was fine in the end and we st- you know, we stayed for observation and there was nothing wrong, didn't even have a bump...
E:	um but it was just because he had that fit that they had to observe him... um so that was... difficult but when I'm on my own, I'm very good... it's when I'm around other people that I fall apart, I guess because it's safe to do that cos when I'm on my own it's not safe to fall apart cos I know I've only got me um and especially when you have a small child you're like, they've only got me, I've gotta keep my shit together... so... I just go to like machine efficient mode, like I knew I have to dial this, I have to keep him still, I have to bla bla bla bla bla um and so that's fine, I only really break down when- when,
R:	then like Jack got to the hospital, then I was like okaaay I can... fall apart now

With this story Claire constructs herself as a survivor and a good one at that, knowing what she must do to care for herself and her child, and as having the ability to do it without Jack if she has to. Her account portrays that she manages this by operating in an unemotional, efficient and controlled manner, going into “*machine efficient mode*” and of having to keep herself together because “*they’ve only got me*” when Shane is in her sole care. The narrative indicates also that she trusts Jack with the care of their children and that when he is with her she can “*fall apart now*”. Claire constructs herself as both an effective self-reliant person when on her own, and as a person who can rely on her husband when he is available, caring for herself in managing her feelings, suggesting a secure attachment to Jack despite previously describing an insecure attachment with her mother and father.

Psycho-social reading

This analysis was conducted on the same interview data to which the narrative analysis was applied and enables further consideration of the context both in which the stories were told, and beyond what was said around the stories themselves. The data insights are enriched by the inclusion of interpretative and illustrative insights, beyond that of the narrative analysis alone.

By including Claire's account that introduces her story of self-care above, a psycho-social reading can be understood to be depicting constraints on her ability to be close to others

I can't open up if I don't- if I feel any kind of... like there's, if it doesn't feel like a safe space to do so... so I think just that and just... caring, like I need to feel like someone cares and makes an effort. I hate- I can't stand it when you say 'oh, let's meet up for coffee on this day and they're like 'oh yeah, yeah, I'll text you' and... no, it doesn't happen, I can't- if someone flakes out on me... twice I'm done... I'm not making any more attempts. If they then

wanna come back and they can attempt, I'm not gonna shun them... but I'm done putting myself out there...

It seems Claire's inner self may see others as unavailable and rejecting, and so to be vulnerable and close with another may arouse feelings of anxiety. Claire splits others into those who are 'good' and care for her, and those who are 'bad' and reject her.

It may be that these experiences she perceives as rejecting reproduce past feelings of painful rejection associated with her mother and her father, as gleaned from analysis of Claire's biographical interview, which would suggest that these are unresolved past relational experiences. In contrast to the security she feels with her husband, by withdrawing and distancing herself from others before they reject her and putting constraints on who she will open up, to defend against the felt anxiety of getting close and involved, and also allows her to remain in control of the relationship.

When asked about whether she thought it was important to have someone close, Claire gives a clear and logical theoretical explanation on the importance of closeness:

we need, you know, we're not... solitary creatures, we're meant to be pack animals, we're meant to have... uhh community, you know when we were all living in caves we didn't all have our own little cubicle that we slept in you know, we all slept together in a big pile because it was safe, it was biologically appropriate...

and "our problems, our social problems come from trying to shut down... that part of us that needs to rely on people" as well as "we absolutely need to be close to other people cos we are not islands..." However, these responses, spoken in the third person possibly to maintain distance, seem to be an intellectualisation which may serve to defend against feelings of anxiety that closeness may evoke, and which avoids emotion. This seems to be yet

another manner for Claire to remain in control of the conversation as well as of her feelings by not giving them voice or space. This silencing also serves to suppress her feelings about this, indicating an avoidant state of mind concerning the importance of having close others.

Integrating the findings of both analytical methods

Both the narrative analysis and the psycho-social reading suggest that Claire is someone who is in control of her feelings and her behaviour, perhaps in response to her relationships with her parents. However, there were some key distinctions in these similar findings – where the narrative analysis constructed this control as Claire’s preservation of agency, the psycho-social reading suggested that it meant that she placed constraints on closeness with others as a way to protect herself from perceived threat of painful feelings. Her relationships with her husband and child seem to indicate that she can transcend these constraints when with them; Claire is able to behave in more secure ways with her husband in certain contexts, but in more insecure ways with others. The layering of these findings illustrates the use of varying attachment behaviours.

Both methods of analyses suggested that Claire is someone who seeks to understand herself and uses this to adapt her attachment behaviour. The narrative analysis understood this as Claire using her agency and power to change her sense of identity. The psycho-social reading went beyond this to understand it in a more nuanced manner: Claire as someone who has dominating intellectual and cognitive awareness of herself. The combination of these suggests a fluidity of attachment styles and behaviour that can enable Claire to successfully change her sense of self and sense of others, in response to different contexts and events.

Discussion

This chapter has described the pluralistic use of narrative analysis and psycho-social readings to explore adult attachment, specifically to consider both how participants make meaning of different attachment behaviours (narrative analysis) and how these behaviours might be informed by psycho-social relationships with the world. It has suggested that Claire makes sense of her attachment behaviours in terms of how her identity varies and provided insight to underlying internal mechanisms and their interplay with external activity.

Some of the findings between the narrative analysis and the psycho-social readings overlapped, and some of the findings were unique to each method, but all were considered of equal value in constructing a complex picture. Using different analysis techniques and bringing different epistemologies to the knowledge generation created multiple layers of meaning-making around Claire's attachment behaviours in this couple's relationship. Considering this within an attachment theory framework has shown that they can vary both within relationships and with context. The findings bring new insight to relational experiences during the transition to second-time parenthood by them as informed by both subjective meaning-making and external events.

The implications of these findings are important in understanding how to support parents, parents expecting subsequent children, and parents-to-be. Inherent assumptions that already being a parent means that sense-of-self and attachment behaviours will simply extend to subsequent children and within the parental relationships, as well as within the couple relationship, can be questioned. Explicit assumptions, commonly held, that attachment and associated behaviours are generally unchanging throughout the lifespan can be explored and considered in therapeutic and other professional support relationships and services.

Analytical pluralism is a challenging process requiring navigation and adoption of different epistemologies and methods, extensive data collection, and time-consuming

analyses. Differences in worldviews on how to access ‘what exists’ must be considered in relation to the methods used, and the methods themselves chosen to best address relevant research questions. This requires expertise in different methods, or indeed a recognition that one does not have the expertise and therefore must compromise on what can be asked of the data. Furthermore, methods such as narrative analysis, and the commitment to minimise reduction of the data, means that clear steps between data and its interpretation are not always obvious, and this can be exacerbated when combining methods. Maintaining a clear reflexive stance and as in this study, a sequential employment of the analyses, carried out with a ‘relaxed awareness’ (Colohan et al., 2012) of the other method(s) in the background, can help (although it should be noted that it is also possible to conduct pluralistic research with a common epistemology underlying the analyses). Similarly, using psychoanalytically or other theoretically informed analyses requires knowledge of psychodynamic (or other) theories that not all analysts will have. It is important therefore for the analyst to recognise their capacity and subsequent limitations in applying a pluralistic approach.

Finally, decisions had to be made and frequently reviewed about how to navigate the different worldviews brought to the study, and attention given to respecting the participants and their data throughout. At times this felt threatened, particularly through the psycho-social readings where there was concern that they might not even recognise themselves or the claims made about their sense of selves and behaviour. Yet it was the choice of conducting psycho-social readings that enabled insight to the complex relationship between the interior and exterior worlds of the participants, and for that to be combined with the interpretivist understanding of the stories they told.

Conclusion

The analytical pluralistic approach that combined narrative analysis with psycho-social readings in this study allowed for better understanding of the influence of context, subjective meaning-making, external events, and the interweaving of the psycho and the social in shaping and informing identity and attachment behaviours. The plurality of epistemologies enabled consideration of variation and the intricate ways in which emotion regulation strategies affect the dynamics of sense of self, coping mechanisms and relationship management in the context of the transition to second-time parenthood.

We encourage researchers to consider applying an analytical pluralistic approach to challenge and enhance understanding of psychological theories explaining human experience and behaviour that have been built on neat and tidy categorisation. Experience is multidimensional and complex after all, and there is space and need for both/and approaches.

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