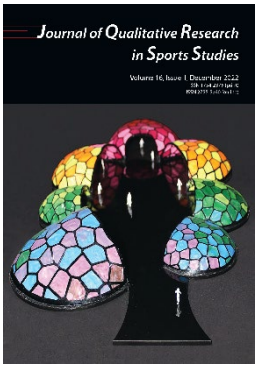
Published by:
Sport and Wellbeing Press
University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK.



Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies

Volume 16, Issue 1, December 2022

Understanding the interpretive paradigm: a guide for sports students learning through qualitative research

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ISSNs: 1754-2375 [print] 2755-5240 [online]
ISBN: 978-0-9955744-8-9 (124 pages)
JQRSS Article No: 3/5-16-1-2022-PG[103]-159

To cite this article:

Sprake, A. and Palmer, C. (2022) Understanding the interpretive paradigm: a guide for sports students learning through qualitative research. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 16, 1, 45-68.

Self-archived URL link to this article:
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Understanding the interpretive paradigm: a guide for sports students learning through qualitative research

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Keywords: *paradigms, ontology, epistemology, methodology, axiology, reflexivity*

Abstract

For many students, the phrase 'research paradigm' conjures up a sense of uncertainty. Like all academic disciplines, qualitative research has its own unique vocabulary, and getting to grips with these 'isms' and 'ologies' is a crucial step toward producing quality research. This paper seeks to navigate research paradigms for the benefit of students undertaking interpretive, qualitative research, either at undergraduate or postgraduate levels. There is a broad consensus that research paradigms consist of a researcher's *ontological* worldview; on the nature of reality, their *epistemological* position; as to how knowledge can be attained and/or claimed, and an appropriate *methodology*; an overarching theory or lens through which various methods or data collection strategies can be used in fieldwork. More recently however, scholars of qualitative inquiry have posited that, as part of their research paradigm, researchers should lay bare their *axiology*; values and demonstrate a commitment to *reflexivity*; a transparency about how their presence and values affect the entire research process. By presenting a student-friendly discussion about these 'isms' and 'ologies', we hope to instil a degree of methodological confidence to undertake qualitative research. For better or worse, a fundamental aspect of becoming (and being) a qualitative researcher is to embrace uncertainty in what we may claim to know. But if you knew how every story ended, the research journey could become predictable and the story that emerges may not be as compelling.

Introduction

In this paper, six areas of methodological language are introduced for the novice researcher who finds themselves in the interpretive paradigm:

1. Paradigms: qualitative research approaches - a 'fabric of ideas'
2. Ontology: the relativist position
3. Epistemology: the constructivist position
4. Methodology: the qualitative approach
5. Axiology: a balanced approach
6. Reflexivity: a transparent approach

JQRSS Article No: 3/5-16-1-2022-PG[103]-159
ISSN: 1754-2375 [print] ISSN: 2755-5240 [online]
Web: https://uclan.academia.edu/ClivePalmer/Journal-of-Qualitative-Research-in-Sports-Studies

Each area in turn has a resource box labelled ***Avenues of curiosity – applied examples to follow up in JQRSS***. These contain some published examples of undergraduate and postgraduate research to illustrate how each area of research philosophy has been put into practice.

As leaders of both undergraduate and postgraduate research, we often encounter highly enthusiastic students who are passionate about undertaking a particular research project. When asked to elaborate on the finer details of their research proposal, however, it soon becomes apparent that many students' initial research ideas are shrouded in ambiguity. For instance, a student might say: 'I'd like to do my study on LGBT footballers', but often without considering the specific context (e.g. the elite, university or grassroots level), population (e.g. age, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual or transgender etc.), geographical location (e.g. the Northwest of England), or even what they actually want to know or find out from the research. Crucially, while they often have a point of access, such as a 'gatekeeper' in the research setting (Gratton and Jones, 2010:200) or some practical experience in their field of interest, there is often vagueness about what methodological approach they might use and why. More often than not, this ambiguity stems from a lack of awareness about, and perhaps an under confidence with, the underpinning conceptual framework of a research methodology. This conceptual framework is referred to as a research paradigm.

In sport, a good Coach or Physical Education teacher will usually think first about what they would like their students to learn in their lesson, before setting out any equipment such as cones or mats. Indeed, they might not even need cones or mats to achieve their lesson aims. This is a useful analogy for students who intend to conduct some research in sport and/or Physical Education because it encourages reflection-for-action and a form of reverse engineering – that is, once you establish the preferred destination; what you want to know or find out, you can then map out the journey; choosing your methodology, and then select the most appropriate method of travel; selecting your data collection strategies.

Deeper philosophical reflection on these decisions, however, will often reveal more than you anticipate. For instance, why have you decided to ask that specific question? Why have you chosen that specific destination? What relationship do you have to the research topic? Why do you think your research question is important? Your answers to such questions are closely tied with your own values, beliefs and experiences, and the way in which you go about addressing your research question is fundamentally connected to your beliefs about the nature of reality and how knowledge can be developed and/or claimed. Each of these considerations are important aspects of your paradigm.

Avenues of curiosity - applied examples to follow up in JQRSS: Getting started

Charles Buckley (2007)
Doing your undergraduate dissertation using qualitative research: Tutor reflections. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 1, 1, 89-93.

Clive Palmer and Gerald Griggs (2010)
Getting started with qualitative research, a guide for undergraduates: from curiosity to methodology. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 4, 1, 1-14.

1. Paradigms: qualitative research approaches - a 'fabric of ideas'

It is important to recognise that various and diverse research paradigms have been established, each informed by their own set of assumptions and beliefs, with a view to achieving specific ends. A comprehensive discussion about the range of research paradigms is beyond the scope of this paper, but detailed overviews of these can be found in existing literature (Sparkes and Smith, 2014; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2018). Whilst there are many approaches to, and methods for, conducting research, this paper is written for the undergraduate or postgraduate research student who is undertaking an interpretive qualitative study and, consequently, the discussions about paradigms will be closely associated with that of the qualitative dimension.

Research paradigms are an essential and constituent part of all research because they inform the selection and usage of appropriate methodologies and methods (Riska, 1972; Hussey and Hussey, 1997; Howell, 2012). Research paradigms are an embedded aspect of all qualitative studies, and they signal the researcher's philosophical orientations and methodological proclivities. For Susanne Langer (1953:3), philosophy is described as a 'fabric of ideas', and research paradigms can be understood in these terms because they refer to a socially derived set of ideas, beliefs or worldviews which underpin the assumptions, principles and strategies of a research community (Fossey *et al.,* 2002; Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006).

Described as intellectual traditions, schools of thought or a set of values and beliefs, research paradigms are generally shared by a research community for some consistency in their investigative endeavours (Ma, 2016). Paradigms reflect the shared assumptions and principles which frame how researchers view, interpret and act within the world (Nguyen, 2019). From this viewpoint, a research paradigm can be characterised as 'the conceptual lens through which the researcher examines the methodological aspects of their research project to determine the research methods that will be used and how the data will be analysed' (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017:26). Paradigms are loaded with consensus about the appropriateness of methodological

principles and practices. It is important, therefore, that you become mindful of your chosen paradigm throughout the research process.

An umbrella term, therefore, the research paradigm is comprised of 'a basic set of beliefs that guide action' (Guba, 1990:17). It is this set of beliefs and first principles that constitute research paradigms, which encompass four important terms: ontology, which explores the nature of reality and of the human in the world; epistemology, which is centred on the relationship between the knower and the known; axiology, which focuses on values and ethical concerns; and methodology, which focuses on the means by which knowledge about the world can be gained (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Therefore, a research paradigm is made up of the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions, their axiological considerations and their chosen research methodology (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). It is contended here, however, that reflexivity is an important aspect of qualitative research paradigms and should be integrated with researchers' paradigmatic awareness. Being reflexive involves a deliberate process of reflection on all aspects of the research, with a specific focus on your personal impact upon it. As a qualitative researcher, you are a central element of the entire research process, so it is important to acknowledge how you – that is, for example, your biography and experiences, values and beliefs, ideologies and politics – will have an inevitable impact upon the research. The integrated features of the qualitative researcher's paradigmatic awareness (Sprake, 2022) are illustrated in figure 1:

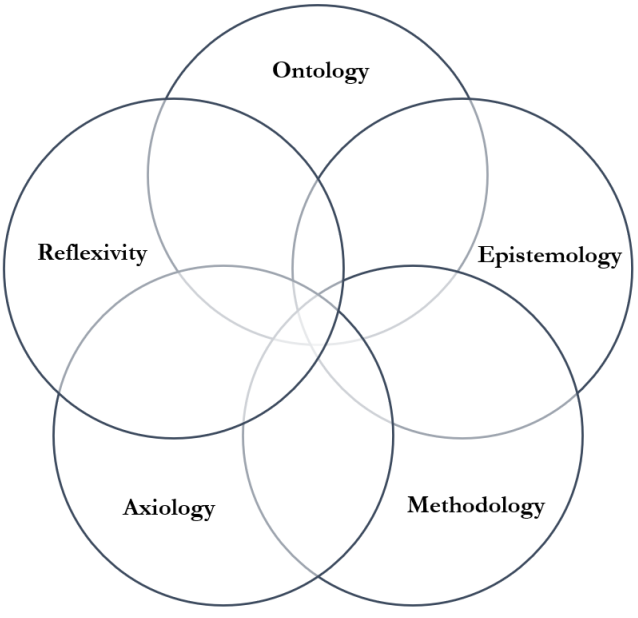

Figure 1: An Integrated Paradigmatic Awareness (Sprake, 2022)

Narrowing down the discussion of theoretical research positions that have evolved, we concentrate here on two of the most pervasive and divergent paradigms, these are the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Positivism and interpretivism are perhaps two of the most prominent philosophies upon which researchers scaffold their work and they each have opposing ontological and epistemological origins (Bassey, 1999; Humphrey, 2013). These paradigms and their foundations will now be discussed in relation to their ontological and epistemological assumptions, and you are invited to reflect upon your own worldview as it pertains to research. Doing this will encourage you to ensure that your study has methodological congruence.

2. Ontology: the relativist position

Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006) insist that researchers must select a paradigm that is aligned with their beliefs about the nature of reality. A salient feature of research paradigms, ontology examines the form and nature of reality as well as what can be known about it (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Researchers employing positivism – otherwise known as positivists - are deeply rooted in the ontological view that research phenomena have universal truths and realities which are external to and independent of the inquirer's physical and metaphysical presence. Research underpinned by this perspective necessitates some form of separation between the researcher and the researched (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988), whereby researchers view themselves as detached outsiders trying to suspend their personal views and values so as not to influence the outcome of the research (Vishal, 2012). Positivists are habitually concerned, therefore, to adopt a value-free standpoint in which they remain neutral and detached from the research, divorcing values from facts (Creswell, 1994; Loughlin, 2018). The extent to which this separation can occur in practice is of course debatable (Saunders *et al.,* 2015), but researchers of this doctrine are obliged to stand behind a proverbial thick wall of one-way glass (Sparkes, 1992) and observe nature as 'she does her thing' (Guba, 1990:19).

Avenues of curiosity – applied examples to follow up in JQRSS: Ontology

John Metcalfe (2011)
Letting go of the side of the pool.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 5, 1, 151-156.

Danny Massaro and Clive Palmer (2020)
To live well - an ontology of Being through a sporting life.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 14, 1, 63-84.

Whilst the positivist paradigm is ubiquitous within the natural sciences, it has also gained significant traction within the social sciences, in large part due to August Comte's sociology (Benton and Craib, 2011) and the subsequent work of Emile

Durkheim (Hasan, 2016). Traditional approaches to the social sciences are conducted in a similar way to natural science research, whereby researchers aim to discover laws about and causalities between human behaviour (Schulze, 2003; Krauss, 2005). Positivist researchers believe that human activities, including those in sport and Physical Education, can be separated into measurable components (Schempp and Choi, 1994) and the assumption is that once patterns, actions and behaviours are discovered within one group, then other groups of a similar type will act and behave in a similar way (Curtner-Smith, 2002). This 'traditional' approach to social science research strived for the replicability, or reproducibility, of results or findings, meaning that if another researcher were to conduct the same experiment at a later date they would achieve the same results – and thus an assertion of some truth. In social research, however, establishing identical experimental conditions is impossible because everything has moved on, including the researcher. Therefore, central to the paradigmatic debate in the social sciences is whether the social world can be adequately understood, investigated or known using positivist principles (Bryman, 2015). Some qualitative researchers argue that 'social life cannot be known through the measurement instruments of surveys and experiments, because of the infinite variability of human interpretation, action and interaction' (Williams, 2016:3). Denzin (2018:843) draws on the ancient Indian parable *The Blind Men and the Elephant* to fortify this position: 'We can never know the true nature of things. We are each blinded by our own perspective. Truth is always partial'.

The interpretivist paradigm is diametrically opposed to positivism. Researchers who employ the interpretive paradigm, or interpretivists, tend to believe that the social world cannot be studied or understood in the same manner as the physical world (Sparkes, 1994; Curtner-Smith, 2002). The ontological position most frequently associated with the interpretivist paradigm is relativism which, like many philosophical concepts, can be traced back to Ancient Greece. Relativism denotes a view of reality and truth as relative to both perceived experience and the context from which they emerge (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). There are, of course, ontological problems with relativism, particularly with the more radical forms of relativism. For instance, it has long been acknowledged that individuals can never completely transcend their own perspectives, schemes or conceptual frameworks (Quine, 1960; Nagel; 1986; Siegel, 2011) and, when combined with the postmodern claim that there are infinite ways of perceiving the world - thus purporting that there are infinite truths and no single truth - the basis of claims to knowledge can be undermined and destabilised (Wight, 2018). However, in a post-truth era, the notion of truth(s) as boundless interpretations has little practical utility, and seemingly overlooks the Aristotelian equipoise: 'Fires burn in both Hellas and Persia, but men's ideas of right and wrong vary from place to place' (Williams, 2016:197).

The interpretivist paradigm allows the researcher to recognise and narrate the meanings associated with human experiences (Fossey *et al.,* 2002) as opposed to quantifying, measuring or predicting them in relation to a hypothesis. Whilst the positivist paradigm has enjoyed the historical monopoly in, for instance, educational research, interpretive approaches have established wide-spread legitimacy in sociological (Riehl, 2001), psychological (Howitt, 2019) and pedagogical domains (Pope, 2013). This approach strives to explore and understand the issues under investigation but told from the perspective of the individuals to which the issues relate (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2010; Sarantakos, 2013). The role of the researcher when undertaking interpretive research is to interpret or understand the participants' personal meanings and actions but viewed within the cultural context in which the action occurs (Grønmo, 2020). Seeking to understand the behaviour, values and perceptions of the participants from an empathic standpoint is known as verstehen, an empathic understanding of human behaviour, and is now a central aspect of qualitative research (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2020). In this regard, primacy is given to 'the personal interpretations of the participant(s) rather than theoretical knowledge of the researcher or previously held 'truths' about a selected phenomenon' (Pope, 2013:21).

According to Geertz (1973), interpretivist research should not be viewed as a scientific endeavour in search of laws, but an interpretive process in a search for meaning. The researcher and the researched can each interpret the world in different ways, resulting in different meanings ascribed to the phenomenon being investigated. Consequently, interpretivists are generally inclined to reject the central tenets of positivism. That is, the researcher is not and cannot be a detached judge of the social world. Rather, they are an integrated part of that social world precisely because they occupy both the physical and metaphysical space within it. Philosophical attacks on positivism, however, are 'rarely directed at true objectivity, but rather at pretenders who use it to mask their own dishonesty, or perhaps the falseness and injustice of a whole culture' (Porter, 1995:3). Put another way, it is not the notion of universal truths that are questioned, but whether impartial and value-free research can ever be attainted and applied when positivist research is itself a human, thus interpretive, endeavour. The vexed debates about the nature of reality and the acquisition of knowledge, as well as the questions they generate, are epistemological issues in that they seek to determine the legitimacy of claims to knowledge (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Whether positivists or interpretivists, researchers' ontological beliefs are always closely tied with their epistemological assumptions (Annells, 1996; Crotty, 1998).

3. Epistemology: the constructivist position

Epistemology is the philosophical study of knowledge and justified beliefs (Hetherington, 2019). A crucial aspect of all research paradigms, epistemology is concerned with the relationship between the knower and the known (Holmes, 1986). In research, epistemology deals with the processes by which something can come to be known and on what basis knowledge of truth or reality can be claimed (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Knowledge always pertains to truth or reality, whereas beliefs occupy the continuum between unsubstantiated claims and justified true beliefs. Drawing on Plato's contention that knowledge adds value to true beliefs, Schmitt (1992:1) suggests that knowledge is 'indefeasibly justified true belief' in that, by acquiring knowledge in addition to true belief, the knower is able to ascertain the unassailable justification for their belief. One of the central epistemological problems, therefore, is to explore when individuals merely believe and when they know (Audi, 2018).

Positivism is typically associated with the epistemological conviction that scientific methods, used to study observable and measurable 'facts' as well as causal relationships, are best placed to legitimise claims to knowledge. The virtues of positivist research, according to Humphrey (2013:5), 'reside in the promise of securing objective knowledge'. Therefore, positivists ordinarily adopt deductive approaches in which a specific expectation is deduced from a general premise or hypothesis, which can then be tested (Schutt, 2019). These approaches result in the proclamation of a priori knowledge. For truth to be enunciated a priori, then reason or knowledge is based upon theoretical deduction as opposed to empirical observation, which denotes a top-down approach to the acquisition of knowledge (Ma, 2016). Researchers concerned with theoretical deduction tend to seek definitive conclusions about their datasets by testing, confirming or rejecting their initial hypothesis. Positivist researchers tend to adopt quantitative methods as these are congruent with research endeavours seeking more generalisable knowledge claims with degrees of certainty for specific outcomes, for example, drug trials, testing new materials etc. However, Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2018:140) are convinced that 'objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imagination of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower'. On the issue of scientific inquiry, Bertrand Russell (1946, cited in Slater, 1997:2) also makes a compelling case: 'Science tells us what we can know, but what we can know is little, and if we forget how much we cannot know we become insensitive to many things of very great importance'.

Understanding social life by obtaining and presenting statistical data is problematic (Porter, 1995), not least because the complexities of social life cannot be explained through statistical data alone. This is not to deny the value and

contribution of positivist research to the understanding of aspects of the social world. Indeed, Hasan (2016) postulates that both positivism and interpretivism are to some degree appropriate for the analysis of the social world; the former being most applicable for providing larger-scale social surveys and descriptive information, and the latter being better placed for unearthing and disseminating the deeper meanings associated with the complexities of the social world. In opposition to positivism, it is argued that all forms of knowledge are socially constructed, and irrespective of how knowledge is manifested, it is always a product of frail human interpretation (Angen, 2000). Madison (1988:44) clarifies the point further, stating that 'the impartial world of science is but an interpretation of the world of our immediate experience', which is an inherently personal experience (Lerum, 2001). By drawing on Foucault's notion of 'inexact knowledges' (Foucault, 1998:321), Lather (2006:787) pushes for a counter-hegemonic view of science that 'troubles what we take for granted as the good in fostering understanding, reflection and action'.

In educational research, such animated debates have shaped the methodological landscape. For instance, drawing on the work of Gage (1989), Denzin (2008:316) states that 'during the 1980s, the paradigm wars… resulted in the demise of quantitative research in education, a victim of attacks from anti-naturalists, interpretivists and critical theorists', creating a space in which ethnographic studies flourished. However, it is advisable to avoid the pitfalls associated with 'methodological tribalism' (Aspers and Corte, 2019:143). The philosophical orientations of your study should not be confused with the need to attack or needlessly criticize positivist research based on your epistemological position. In fact, there is growing recognition that qualitative research is informed by multiple epistemological positions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), meaning that different philosophical perspectives resonate with researchers at different points and that this can affect their viewpoint and approach over time (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). Much like epistemological positions are informed by ontological worldviews, the methodology should also align with the researcher's ontological and epistemological positions.

Avenues of curiosity – applied examples to follow up in JQRSS: Epistemology

Dena Read and Clive Palmer (2020)
Growing with your research.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 14, 1, 147-186.

David Grecic (2015)
Back to front coach-learning, a personal reflection on the research journey.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 9, 1, 235-256.

4. Methodology: the qualitative approach

The next step is recognising that your views about ontology and epistemology are fundamental in shaping your methodology and methods. It is crucial to appreciate the fundamental differences between quantitative research (numerically informed studies) and qualitative research (studies that are non-numerical). At their most basic level, quantitative studies tend to ask questions such as 'how many?' or 'what percentage?' in order to explain a phenomenon, whereas qualitative studies seek to develop 'rich insights' which help to better understand the 'lived experiences' of individuals or groups. For instance, large-scale quantitative studies can reveal fascinating, and sometimes surprising, insights into broad societal trends. For example, in a study with over 10,000 participants from 22 countries, researchers uncovered that in countries with the highest levels of gender equality, men and women tend to gravitate towards their traditional gender roles (Mac Giolla and Kajonius, 2019). This suggests that the more egalitarian countries become with regard to gender equality, the differences between men and women increase. What this quantitative study does not reveal, however, are the rich, nuanced and detailed accounts of the lived experiences of the individual participants in the study. Put another way, there are over 10,000 unique and personal stories behind this statistical analysis, stories which quantitative approaches seldom reveal. For the deeper insights into people's lived experiences, qualitative approaches are better suited. Neither quantitative nor qualitative approaches can claim superiority over the other. Qualitative inquiry simply seeks to go to the places that quantitative studies cannot reach – that is, the highly individualised and unique depths of individual and group experience. Therefore, your focus should be on selecting the most appropriate approach for your particular inquiry by selecting the methodology that is fit for purpose.

The hallmarks of qualitative research are based upon human curiosity for, and appreciation of, the complexities inherent to social phenomena with an understanding that investigations are temporal, transactional, and transitory. Undertaking qualitative research in dynamic and complex environments requires a sound methodological awareness because, like society, qualitative research is always complex, dynamic and 'on the move' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018:1). Research traditions, paradigms, methodologies and their associated methods are in a continual state of flux and adaptation (Torrance, 2016). As a research student, therefore, you should seek to recognise the societal and cultural complexities associated with your field of interest e.g., sport, physical education, coaching, the outdoors etc., and capitalise on the methodological flexibilities and idiosyncrasies associated with qualitative inquiry. Eisner (2017:169) states that 'in qualitative matters cookbooks ensure nothing'. Therefore, while your study should adopt a research methodology that is both philosophically informed and contextually appropriate, you should also

anticipate and embrace the inevitable twists and turns that come with the territory of qualitative fieldwork.

Below are two examples of how previous undergraduate students, (1) Isabelle Breslin, and (2) Anna Cresswell, constructed part of their undergraduate dissertation methodology chapters. Their research was later published in the Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies. Isabelle's research was concerned with the self-perceptions of female leaders in the Outdoor Industry:

> **(1) Philosophy to methodology (Breslin and Palmer, 2016:182-183)**
> An understanding of philosophy and methodology is crucial to choosing the appropriate methods and analytical approach in research (Riska, 1972). There are two main methodological approaches to research which both have different ontological and epistemological stand-points (Humphrey, 2013). Positivism is underpinned by the ontological perspective that the research phenomenon is an objective reality, regardless of the researcher's perspective or beliefs (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Thus, the researcher remains independent of that which is being researched (Creswell, 1994) and focuses on collecting data about the objective reality which is out there to be discovered (Krathwohl, 1998). Such an approach may be driven by deductive reasoning, whilst steering through a range of dependant and independent variables. Therefore, positivism lends itself to a quantitative project, being theory led, seeking definitive answers from testing data to confirm or reject a hypothesis (Silverman, 2013).
>
> My personal philosophy however is centred on relativism, i.e. questioning the existence of absolute truths. Relativism is the doctrine that knowledge, truth, and morality exist in relation to culture, society, or historical context, and are not absolute. Therefore, I prefer qualitative methodological approaches. This philosophical attitude underpins the interpretivist and subjectivist approach to research, maintaining that the notion of reality is unique to the observer (Guba and Lincoln, 1983). The interpretivist epistemologically acquires socially constructed knowledge rather than objectively determined knowledge (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, and Gronhaug, 2001). Unlike quantitative methodology, qualitative methodology requires the researcher to interact with what is being researched (Creswell, 1994). Moreover, it is inductive and data informed, allowing for new information in the conclusion: theory generated from observations (Lewis, Saunders, and Thornhill, 2007). Subjectivism explores how individuals perceive the world (Krathwohl, 1998) and this approach is traditionally used to investigate complex social phenomena that are difficult to measure quantitatively (Patton, 2002). Methodologically, I feel I have chosen the approach which is 'most appropriate' (Mesel, 2013:750) in this context. A positivist approach would seemingly struggle to generate the sensitivity from data required for my aims of exploring self-perceptions. Therefore, a qualitative methodological approach concentrating on understanding phenomena from an individual's perspective was adopted (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Scotland, 2012).

Anna Cresswell's dissertation captured her methodology in a similar manner. Her research was a study of motivations in novice snowboarders, which can be found in this volume of JQRSS (volume 16):

(2) Methodology (Cresswell and Palmer, 2022:22)

There are two main methodological approaches to research, each with different ontological and epistemological standpoints (Rees, 1996). Positivism, associated with quantitative research, is underpinned by the ontological perspective that the phenomenon being studied is an objective reality, regardless of the researcher's perspective or beliefs (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Thus, the researcher remains independent and relatively detached from that which is being researched (Creswell, 1994). Such an approach may be driven by deductive reasoning, whilst steering through a range of dependant and independent variables. Therefore, positivism lends itself to a quantitative project, being theory led, seeking definitive answers from testing data to confirm or reject a hypothesis (Silverman, 2013). The methodological stance to qualitative research is underpinned by an interpretivist and subjectivist reasoning, maintaining that the notion of reality is unique to the observer (Guba and Lincoln, 1983). The interpretivist epistemology acquires socially constructed knowledge rather than objectively determined knowledge [measured] (Carson, Gilmore, Perry and Gronhaug, 2001). Unlike quantitative methodology, qualitative research requires the researcher to interact with what is being researched - acknowledge that they are part of the world they are researching (Creswell, 1994). Moreover, it is inductive; data informed, allowing for new information and discoveries. Thus, theory emerges or is generated from observations (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007).

As this research is primarily concerned to understand the experiences of novice snowboarders, and I am drawing upon my personal experiences in that activity, it is an interpretive and qualitative study. I am relatively immersed in the phenomenon being studied, and central to the research processes i.e. I am an active snowboarder, an investigator and theorising sense maker. Methodologically, I feel I have chosen the right approach for this 'socially grounded' inquiry. A positivist approach would struggle to generate the sensitivity from data required for my aims of exploring the perceptions of novice snowboarders regarding their motivations.

Avenues of curiosity – applied examples to follow up in JQRSS: Methodology

Isabelle Breslin and Clive Palmer (2016)
Exploring self-perceptions of female leaders in the Outdoors.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 10, 1, 177-210.

Anna Cresswell and Clive Palmer (2022) EAT - SLEEP - SNOWBOARD - REPEAT. WHY? A study of motivations in novice snowboarders.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 16, 1, 1-28.

Qualitative research primarily explores the meanings and interpretations which individuals or groups assign to their contexts and thus the purpose is to investigate a social phenomenon against the backdrop of its natural setting (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2020). A central tenet of qualitative research is therefore to explore the meanings that people give to parts of their lives (Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault, 2016) and to seek understanding of individuals' experiences through their own frame of

reference (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). For Denzin and Lincoln (2018:10), qualitative research is 'a situated activity that locates the observer in the world'. From this perspective, the researcher is viewed as a participant observer, generating socially derived data gathered through various forms (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Context is everything and what you see depends on where you stand.

To be a researcher, however, is 'not to be a passive onlooker but to be an observer with a purpose' (Palmer and Griggs, 2010:4). Qualitative research permits a wide range of flexible approaches to, and methods for, the study of social phenomena (Saldaña, 2011) and researchers should be prepared for this complexity. Typically, qualitative research generates multiple forms of data from a variety of sources (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) and methodological flexibility allows for the direction of the study to be influenced by the data collected (Palmer and Griggs, 2010). Furthermore, qualitative research is discovery-oriented or theory emergent, so there are no overly prescriptive sequences of data collection or analysis. Put another way, there is no hypothesis or statement of intent as to what the research will find (Richards and Morse, 2013). The researcher, therefore, is able to respond as necessary to their changing situation as a researcher in the field.

In an effort to problematize the utility of research positions and paradigms, Peterson (2020) argues that 'the problem isn't what the world is made of; it's how to act in the world, regardless of what it's made of'. How to act in the world is a highly individual issue but it is invariably and closely tied with morality and ethics. Of course, decisions about how to act in the world and about what constitutes educational worth is a matter of values.

5. Axiology: a balanced approach

In addition to ontology, epistemology and methodology, a fourth aspect of research paradigms was proposed by Heron and Reason (1997) known as axiology. Deriving from two Greek words (axios, or worthy, and logos, meaning reason and theory), axiology refers to the philosophical study of values and ethics. The idea that research is a value-laden enterprise is not new. Indeed, Lincoln and Guba (1985) acknowledged that researchers' values were an important consideration because they offered a point of departure from positivist methodologies, in that, by identifying the research problem, choosing the theoretical framework and deciding on which data collection strategies to use, researchers were engaging in value-laden activities. It was not until more recently that Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2018:132) agreed that axiology should be viewed as 'a part of the foundation of philosophical dimensions for a paradigm proposal' because it enables researchers to 'see the embeddedness of ethics within, not external to, paradigms'.

Accepting that research in the interpretivist paradigm is invariably value-laden, the researcher is seen as an inseparable part of the social world under investigation and so the processes, findings and reporting will be influenced by their personal and professional values (Saunders *et al.,* 2019). The personal viewpoints of the researcher can present issues for the credibility, integrity and representation of research. If so inclined, they could obscure or undermine the data according to their personal values or to pursue their own ends. The intention here is not to erase the researcher's predispositions, but to cautiously acknowledge them as an inseparable part of life. Methodologies are inextricably linked with researchers' philosophies (Creswell and Poth, 2018) and thus their predispositions are not only possible but inevitable. The point is to make it visible throughout. A balanced axiology denotes that the outcome of any research will invariably reflect the values of the researcher but that the researcher will maintain their integrity and transparency throughout (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). This level of self-reflection in research, known as reflexivity, is the final aspect of the paradigmatic awareness outlined previously.

6. Reflexivity: a transparent approach

Qualitative researchers are increasingly encouraged to reflect on the degree to which their own values and interests may intersect with the research being conducted. This concerns their positionality with respect to the phenomena being studied and how the researcher's actions affect the entire research process. The paradigm wars, mentioned previously, had a significant impact upon the research landscape in Physical Education. Sparkes (1992) points out that towards the latter part of the 1980s there was an upsurge of academic interest in the conceptualisation of the research process, in researchers themselves and in the foundation of knowledge claims in the Physical Education context. In problematizing claims to knowledge, researchers were increasingly encouraged to adopt reflexive approaches in which they are constantly mindful of their positionality qualitative research. In practical terms, what is revealed about the social world is always a consequence of the position adopted by the onlooker (Sparkes, 1992).

This is known as the reflexive turn in social research (McKenzie, 2009) which calls upon researchers to reflect on their research experiences with increased transparency. Heidegger (1962:191-192) believed that fully detached reflection is impossible because 'interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something to us'. Therefore, researchers should always recognise their own assumptions because presuppositions can persistently sneak back into their reflections (van Manen, 1990). In contemporary qualitative research, the point is not to avoid this but to acknowledge it as both and inevitable and valuable resource for qualitative inquiry.

Reflexivity is 'a conscious experiencing of the self' and should be regarded as a central thread of the research process (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2018:142). Reflexivity refers to 'the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research' (Davies, 2008:4). From the outset it is important to point out that the unfolding 'products' of this research will be influenced by the complex, dynamic and unpredictable interactions between the researcher and the researched. The point is not to suppress this truism but to embrace it as a methodological inevitability. All social activities, including research itself, are endogenous because they contain both internal experiences and personal meanings for the individuals involved (Cunliffe, 2003). The researcher's social background and experiences may affect their views about, and interpretations of, the phenomenon under study which may lead to knowledge claims that are not based purely on the reality of the phenomena but also on the researcher's personal worldview (Grønmo, 2020). Reflexivity involves the deliberate processes by which the researcher acknowledges the way in which he or she affects the processes and outcomes of their research (Davies, 2008; Haynes, 2012). It is based on the epistemological belief that the researcher is an inseparable part of the social construction of knowledge (Angen, 2000).

Avenues of curiosity – applied examples to follow up in JQRSS: Reflexivity

Chris Hughes and Clive Palmer (2020)
One foot in the cave - a sensorial adventure of a first-time caver.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 14, 1, 335-354.

Clive Palmer and Chris Hughes (2011)
Upward skydiving – a journey through data.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 5, 1, 101-128.

Reflexivity does not infer a fixation on establishing a firm grip on validity, as that is more akin to the positivist approach. Instead, reflexivity is a means of accepting and capturing the researcher's individuality by putting it to creative use (Okely, 1996) in a manner which demonstrates transparency. Reflexivity, therefore, is a mechanism by which the researcher can reflect on how their presence, behaviour or values, for instance, may have impacted upon the data, which can then be reported to establish research integrity. Conversely, the researcher can identify how the data, or the phenomenon under study, may also have affected them. Reinharz (1997) expands on the researcher's relationship to the field, by suggesting that the self is both brought to and created in the field. She contends that researchers bring with them their research-oriented selves, which refers to the planned and focused research activities, their brought selves, which is comprised of their socially, historically and

personally created viewpoints, and their environmentally created selves, wherein the self is in a continual state of becoming due to the interplay between the self and the research context (Reinharz, 1997). Reflexivity, therefore, denotes 'a process of on-going mutual shaping between researcher and research' (Attia and Edge, 2017:33). The researcher is a human instrument (Guba and Lincoln, 1981) that acts as a malleable conduit through which the 'realities' of the social world are illuminated. Invariably, the light must pass through the researcher's methodological lens, and, through the transparency of reflexivity, the researcher can present a research story that recognises the inevitable refraction of knowledge. Whilst much is invested in conceptual frameworks and theoretical perspectives, Saldaña (2014:977) criticises the chronic complexities associated with social research and bluntly states: 'How 'bout me just sayin' what it really is and what I really mean: This is where I'm comin' from…'.

Avenues of curiosity - applied examples to follow up in JQRSS: researcher as central commentator, i.e. 'sayin' it how it is!'

David Grecic and Clive Palmer (2013)
Tales from the tee: narrative accounts of being coached in golf.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 7, 1, 127-152.

Clive Palmer and David Grecic (2014)
You can't buy love at TESCO: observation field notes of a coach education event.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 8, 1, 89-118.

Ryan Louis and Clive Palmer (2013)
My life and the beautiful game.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 7, 1, 1-10.

James Edwards and Clive Palmer (2016)
Getting home.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 10, 1, 127-156.

Clive Palmer (2016)
Boots-and-me: an ethno-sensual account of love, dedication and smelly old boots.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 10, 1, 269-292.

Conclusion

Research paradigms provide the conceptual framework which underpins and informs a research methodology. Understanding research paradigms can be challenging for all novice researchers, including students of Sport and Physical Education. It requires genuine, deliberate and sustained reflections about every aspect of your research; from questions about what you want to achieve, how you intend to achieve it, and why you have chosen your research topic in the first

instance. Furthermore, contemporary qualitative research paradigms, we argue, require a transparency on your part about your values and ethical commitments (axiology) as well as a display of honesty and integrity by sharing your work with for example, peers and colleagues at seminars and conferences, or through publication. This ongoing sharing as part of the research process will promote an enabling sense of 'growing with your research' which helps to show how you have impacted upon the entire research process (reflexivity). Think of it as creating an audit trail for your thoughts and decisions, which you can critique along the way to plot and justify the twists and turns in your research.

With various and diverse research paradigms being established, we encourage you to consult the wider literature for a more detailed overview of these. However, we have endeavoured here to introduce some of the key paradigmatic considerations as they relate to interpretive qualitative research. If you are a student intending to embark on a qualitative research project, we suggest that you make a conscious effort to develop what we call an integrated paradigmatic awareness (Sprake, 2022), which comprises five key areas:

1. Your *ontological* worldview - a view on the nature of reality,
2. Your *epistemological* position - a view about how knowledge can be attained and/or claimed,
3. Your chosen *methodology* - an overarching theory or lens through which various methods or data collection strategies can be used in fieldwork,
4. *Axiology* - a transparency about what you value in your research,
5. *Reflexivity* - honesty and integrity about how you affect the entire research process.

Qualitative research can be challenging for new researchers on two fronts: not only is it challenging to conduct qualitative research in the field e.g. gaining access to participants, playing the role of a researcher during fieldwork and implementing data collection strategies, never mind handling and analysing the data, but qualitative research has its own unique vocabulary for researchers to get to grips with e.g. paradigms, ontology, epistemology, methodology, axiology, reflexivity etc. While learning the language of qualitative research can be a lengthy process, it is rewarding and a worthy investment in your time and effort to become a qualitative researcher. It is hoped that this paper has gone some way to providing you with some of the key terminology to help you navigate a path in the uncertain lands of qualitative research – and remember, following the data is the essence of qualitative inquiry, so you can always ask for directions.

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Reviewer Comments

Reviewer 1: This paper takes you on a journey through the key interpretive paradigms relating to qualitative research. If you are a PhD researcher, like me, you are likely on your own quest for knowledge, on a voyage of discovery and a search for answers to your own research problems. Helping 'travellers' along the way, this account provided me with an accessible, comprehensive and coherent explanation to areas of research methodology that for me were rather foggy. In addition, the inserted *avenues of curiosity* reveal inviting titles from the extensive library of the JQRSS; they will certainly entice you to explore further. Researching is not just about the what? and the how? Fundamentally, it should be about the why? Why do you think your research is important? is just one of the probing questions presented in this paper. So, will you get plenty of answers? Absolutely. Will you get all the answers? Perhaps not. Will you be tempted to travel further on your voyage of discovery? I hope so, as up to now I had become expert at avoiding the fog, but this article will help me navigate the challenges that lay ahead.

Reviewer 2: This student friendly paper provides insight to the issues; theoretical and practical, around the interpretive paradigm, supported by 'avenues of curiosity' as examples of applied qualitive research that relate to this area of methodology. In so doing, the reader is helped to navigate the interpretive paradigm, consisting of a researchers' ontological view, epistemological understanding, methodological approach, principles (axiological) and further acknowledgment of who they are as the researcher within it all (reflexivity). This paper has helped me make sense of the broadness of this research paradigm, where my own investigation sits within it, and a renewed confidence to articulate it. I have now started to unpick the proverbial fabric of my own ideas, before attempting to knit it all back together, in addition to recognising who I am within my own research project.