Researching Religion, Disability and Sport: Reflections and Possibilities

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Abstract

As part of broader debates surrounding the relevance and applicability of qualitative research methods and methodologies within the context of Practical Theology, the present essay addresses the status of qualitative research within the area of religion, disability and sport. In so doing, the essay further encourages the use of empirical research within the orbits of Practical Theology whilst at the same time challenging current assumptions regarding the scope and remit of the empirical methods and methodologies that are commonly endorsed within the sub-discipline. The essay concludes by suggesting that the area of religion, disability and sport should be seen as an emerging sub-disciplinary field and one to which a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods may be suited.

KEYWORDS: Research, qualitative, religion, spirituality, disability, sport

INTRODUCTION

> … whether through inclination, or disciplinary convention or habit or methodological prejudice, theologians have tended to avoid fieldwork. The result has been that empirical research … has often been discussed by theologians as a theoretical move or indeed even as a theoretical or theological necessity, but strangely this is very often divorced from any real or sustained engagement with actual churches and communities.
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> (Ward, 2012b: 1-2).

> [I]n very simple terms, it has been the custom in theological circles to talk about social realities in ways that lack credibility. It is interesting to contrast the way we theologians customarily talk about the contemporary church with the way we deal with historical sources or philosophical sources. When it comes to history or philosophy, we proceed with great caution. We take great care to make sure that we abide by accepted academic convention and we want to demonstrate that we are proceeding with academic rigor. Then when we talk about the contemporary church, completely different rules seem to apply. It becomes acceptable to make assertions where there is no evidence. We assume a common perception of contemporary church life between author and reader. We base whole arguments on anecdote and the selective treatment of experience. We are prone to a sleight of hand that makes social theory appear to be a description of social reality—which of course it is not.
>
> (Ward, 2012b: 4).

The above extracts are taken from the introduction to an edited collection by Ward (2012a) entitled, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, a volume which aims to consider the applicability of qualitative research methods to the study of the contemporary Christian life and that of the Church; what Ward (and others) have referred to as the 'ethnographic turn' in Practical Theology (see also Vigen and Scharen, 2011; Fiddes, 2012; Phillips, 2012; Swinton, 2012). As the extracts suggest, Ward problematizes the fact that, as a discipline, Theology has been somewhat reluctant to recognise the value of empirical research and slow to accept the relevance and benefits of adopting research practices from across the social sciences. In order to bridge the gap between theory (and theology) and

practice, theologians, it seems, need to be encouraged to leave the security of their desks and to venture out into the real world of social research.

Such a lack of engagement with qualitative research methods and methodologies contrasts markedly with the situation in areas such as sociology, criminology, organisational studies and, latterly, psychology. Indeed, the 'ethnographic turn' is nothing new to a whole range of broader sub/disciplinary fields, all of which raises the question as to why it took so long for theologians to explore the principles and practices of qualitative research. Alas they are not on their own. So too, scholars in the area of sport and religion have demonstrated similar reticence. Whilst there has been a marked increase over the past 30-40 years in the academic literature surrounding the sport-religion interface, (see, for example: Novak, 1967; Higgs, 1995; Hoffman, 1992, 2010; Ladd and Mathisen, 1999; Watson and Parker, 2012a, 2012b) few of these studies have drawn upon empirical research findings to any significant degree and even fewer on qualitative data collection and analysis (Watson and Parker, 2013a). That said, there are a handful of empirical investigations that have adopted various qualitative methodologies to explore different aspects of the sport-Christianity nexus (see, for example: Beller *et al*., 1996; Stevenson, 1997; Dunn and Stevenson, 1998; Czech et al., 2004; Schroeder and Scribner, 2006; Bennett *et al*., 2006; Czech and Bullet, 2007; Ellis, 2012; McMullin, 2012; Rial, 2012; Watson and Parker, 2012). With all of this in mind it is our intention within this paper to present a brief overview of the status of qualitative research within the context of Practical Theology and, more specifically, within the area of religion, disability and sport. Our overall aim is to further encourage the use of empirical research amongst practical theologians whilst at the same time challenging current assumptions regarding the scope and remit of the empirical methods and methodologies that are commonly endorsed within the sub-discipline. The paper concludes by suggesting that the area of religion, disability and sport should be seen as an emerging sub-disciplinary field and

one to which a combination of both qualitative and quantitative empirical research methods may be suited.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND PRACTICAL THEOLOGY: EPISTEMOLOGY, METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

Within Practical Theology there is a plethora of academic work surrounding the relationship between religion, spirituality and disability (see, for example: Eiesland, 1994; Reinders, 2008; Reynolds, 2008; Swinton and Brock, 2007; Creamer, 2009; Swinton, 2011; Brock and Swinton, 2012). Likewise, as a disciplinary area within the broader reaches of the social and natural sciences, sport is no stranger to empirical investigation. Despite a tendency for the traditional sports sciences (physiology, biomechanics, kinesiology, psychology etc.) to favour nomothetic (positivist) approaches to scholarly enquiry, since the 1970s the emergence of a body of knowledge around the social and cultural aspects of sport has meant that qualitative research methods and methodologies have become a staple in this field (see, for example: Fine, 1987; Theberge, 2000; Howe, 2004; Roderick, 2006). In turn, accounts surrounding the relationship between disability and sport have also adopted a qualitative perspective (see, for example: Howe, 2008; Smith and Sparkes, 2008; Sparkes and Smith, 2009; Brittain and Greene, 2012) as have those examining the relationship between religion/spirituality, disability and sport (see for example: O'Keefe, 2006; Watson and Parker, 2012; Green (this volume); Howe and Parker (this volume)). Of course, the adoption of a particular investigative approach is not simply a question of preference or affinity on the part of the researcher. Just as the selection of a particular methodological paradigm is intimately linked to the research questions (or problems) and epistemological issues in play, so too are specific research methods and techniques driven by methodological assumption and values (Bryman, 2012). Choices over method should be based on informed, principled and disciplined decisions thereby reducing the naïve pursuit of particular investigative trends

(Sparkes and Smith, 2014). For those carrying out research as practical theologians, the situation becomes slightly more complex given the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of Theology as a parent discipline, as Swinton and Mowat, (2006: 73) note:

> The inherent tendency of qualitative research to assume a fundamentally non-foundational epistemology which is highly sceptical about the possibility of accessing truth that has any degree of objectivity, stands in uneasy tension with the theological assumption that truth is available and accessible through revelation. If the practical theologian is going to be able to work effectively and authentically with qualitative research, this tension will need to be resolved.

In proposing further synergies between the broader traditions of qualitative research and Practical Theology, Swinton and Mowat (2006: 75) go on to outline how the model of Practical Theology which they advocate draws on a variety of hermeneutical perspectives '… in its attempts to understand God and human experiences', thus making explicit connections to the interpretative paradigm of social science research. At first glance there appears to be nothing remotely problematic about this suggestion; scholars and practitioners working within the realms of Practical Theology are necessarily interested to find out about those aspects of social life to which qualitative research methods and methodologies are ideally (and necessarily) suited. Rather, the dilemma lies within the contrasting epistemological assumptions underpinning the parent discipline of Theology and those of the interpretative paradigm itself; the former offering a somewhat non-negotiable perspective on knowledge, 'truth' and reality, the latter promoting a much more flexible understanding of the

way in which everyday life is socially constructed (Crotty, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

For Swinton and Mowat (2006: 76) the over-arching problematic is summarised thus: "… a methodology which assumes that truth is totally inaccessible, and that the social world is *nothing* but a series of ever-changing social constructions, clashes in fundamental ways with a methodology which assumes the reality of revelation and the reality of creation" (original emphasis). At one level this is an issue for Practical Theology (as a sub/discipline) to resolve and to some degree this has been addressed by way of the development of a specific method, namely *mutual critical correlation*, the aim of which is to bring together the four elements of the practical theological enterprise: hermeneutics, correlation, criticality and theology. At another level, if we accept that the broader traditions of qualitative research are suitable and applicable to Practical Theology, then one of the things that we may wish to consider is how to expand the scope (and discussion) of related methods and methodologies within this field.

EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF RESEARCH IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

As part of their examination of the uses and applicability of qualitative research within the context of Practical Theology, Swinton and Mowat (2006: 50-1) address the issue of 'multi-method' research approaches. In the ensuing discussion they argue in favour of going outside of the 'acknowledged boundaries' of the qualitative tradition and for the adoption of '… a much more fluid and flexible use of qualitative research methods …'. What Swinton and Mowat (2006) appear to suggest here is that researchers should be encouraged to experiment with different data collection methods and techniques within the context of qualitative empirical enquiry. As part of this call to a greater sense of fluidity, Swinton and Mowat (2006) further state that whilst they strongly advocate the development

of qualitative work within Practical Theology, they do not promote the abandonment of 'pure' (nomothetic/quantitative) methods. In taking this argument one step further, we argue that not only should practical theologians be encouraged to explore the variety of methods and techniques available within the qualitative tradition, but that they should also consider the possibility of widening their methodological horizons to include the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods as part of their broader research ventures.

How then might we expand the range of research methods and techniques at our disposal in order to facilitate more sophisticated analyses of social life? Moreover, how might we expand the scope and remit of qualitative research approaches to include nomothetic elements whilst staying true to the underpinning premises of interpretive research? In the remainder of this paper we build upon and extend the work of Swinton and Mowat (2006) via a discussion of these two issues and challenges. In terms of expanding our view of overall research approaches we discuss the notion of 'mixed methods' research, whilst in terms of extending our view of specific methods and techniques we discuss some of the benefits of using focus groups with research respondents. We argue that because both of these suggestions sit comfortably amidst wider debates on the application of qualitative research methods and methodologies, collectively they have the potential to enhance the depth, rigour and quality of the research that we, as practical theologians, carry out.

Mixed Methods Research

By way of summary, the line of argument that we have taken thus far is as follows. First and foremost, we recognise that there has been something of a leaning towards qualitative research in Practical Theology in recent years and that this trend is apparent within emerging research concerning the inter-relationships between religion, disability and sport. Second, we also recognise that there have been suggestions within the orbits of Practical

Theology that not only should further qualitative work be encouraged, but that wider methodological issues and agendas should be explored in order to broaden the scope and remit of empirical work in the field. In this section of the essay we argue that one of the ways that we might facilitate such explorations is to encourage the further expansion of empirical research activity in related areas through the use of mixed methods research.

In recent years, a mixed methods approach to research has become increasingly popular in the social sciences (Brannen, 1995; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010; Cresswell and Plano Clarke, 2011), whereby the integration of different research methods takes place within the context of a single, over-arching study. There are various reasons for this growth in popularity not least of which is the desire of researchers to come up with increasingly sophisticated research strategies and designs in response to the increasingly complex research problems with which they are presented. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is considerable debate about how the term 'mixed methods' should be used. For example, some scholars define mixed methods approaches simply as the combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, whereas others argue that mixed method design may comprise the use of two methods from within a single paradigm. Some consider mixed methods to be a term describing the use of two complete research projects within the same overall study, whereas others may consider this to be a definition of a multiple study method. In turn, the application of mixed methods can be structured in various ways. For example, they can be deployed *sequentially* where the implementation of each conventional method represents a separate and distinct study. Or they can also be used in a *nested* fashion whereby one method (or paradigm) is dominant, and the other is used less frequently – in fact this kind of arrangement is not uncommon (McGannon and Schweinbenz, 2011). Similarly different methods might be used in an *integrated* way where both paradigms are deployed concurrently to explore questions and hypotheses

throughout the phases of a study. For the purposes of the present discussion we will consider the term ‘mixed methods’ to refer to research that is carried out using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods within the context of a single research project (see Czech and Bullet, 2007).

Of course, over the years there has been a significant amount of academic debate around the relationship between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research (see Bryman, 1988, 2006a, 2006b; Lunde, et al. 2013; Smith, et al. 2012). Hence, for the ‘purists’, combining and integrating methods from different research paradigms does not sit well primarily for two reasons: first, because some view specific research methods as being entirely embedded in particular epistemological and methodological traditions, i.e. that semi-structured interviews are a method of collecting data that can only be deployed under the auspices of ‘qualitative’ research, and second because others are of the view that combining qualitative and quantitative methods breaches a series of paradigmatically specific assumptions and values which means that it is impossible to truly integrate two necessarily incompatible sets of practices and findings.

Fortunately, a number of academic scholars within the social sciences have gone further and have suggested ways in which qualitative and quantitative methods may be seen as compatible (see Brannen, 2005; Mason 2006; Bryman 2006a). Bryman’s (2006a) work has been particularly influential in this respect. As part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded initiative, Bryman carried out a content analysis study of academic journal articles which reported the findings of mixed methods research projects over a ten-year period (1994-2003). The projects covered five areas of social science research: sociology; social psychology; human, social and cultural geography; management and organizational behaviour; and media and cultural studies. A central focus of Bryman’s

analysis was the rationales put forward by the respective researchers for their integration of qualitative and quantitative methods.

From this exercise Bryman (2006a, 2012) extrapolates a whole range of such rationales, these include: *Triangulation* (where mixed methods were used to corroborate research findings); *Offset* (where methods were combined in order to maximise the strengths of some and minimize the weaknesses of others); and *Completeness* (where the integration of methods served to provide a more comprehensive research investigation). The key point that Bryman (2006a, 2012) makes is that the adoption of a mixed methods strategy is not simply an arbitrary decision on the part of the researcher but one around which a clear rationale is developed in line with the research questions at hand. In turn, Bryman makes it clear that mixing methods is not simply about generating data for the sake of it; that is, we must not assume that data volume necessarily equates to increased levels of analytical depth, rigour and/or quality. With these issues in mind, how then do we go about designing mixed methods studies and how do such rationales work in practice? More importantly, how might we go about this kind of work within the context of research concerning religion, disability and sport? Let us pause briefly to think hypothetically about the practical application of these questions.

In their systematic review of the academic literature surrounding sport and Christianity, Watson and Parker (2013b) identify a number of areas for future research, one of which is the theological analysis of disability sport (including reflection on institutions, such as the Paralympics and Special Olympics). Notwithstanding the contents of the present volume, previous work in this area appears relatively sparse, save for the offerings of O'Keefe (2006) and Watson and Parker (2013a). We may frame a related research question thus: 'What role does religion/spirituality play in the lives of Special Olympians?' In the first instance we must recognise that any such study should be conceptualised and designed

around this central question and this includes the choice of research method(s). In order to tap the lived experiences (i.e. subjective realities) of Special Olympians in relation to the role that religion/spirituality plays in their lives, a qualitative (phenomenological) methodology is required which will enable the researcher to access, interpret and understand the personal accounts of those concerned.

In the first instance existing literature around related issues would need to be explored (i.e. in areas such as religion, disability and health, religion, spirituality and sport, and the Special Olympics, etc.) at which point further (and more specific) research questions may well emerge. When it then comes to the choice of data collection methods the researcher has various options at his/her disposal depending upon the level of access s/he has to respondents and to the research setting itself, the most likely choices being (participant) observation and semi-structured interviews - carried out with a relatively small number of individuals. Hence, the very nature of the central research question drives decisions and choices concerning methodological approach and data collection.

In theory, such a strategy would appear to suffice in terms of gleaning the kinds of data that the project was designed to uncover. However, what if, at the design stage, the researcher decided that a more comprehensive account of respondent lives might be accessed by way of adopting a mixed methods approach? How would this alter this mono-method design? At a very basic level an alternative project design might be conceptualised as follows. The study may begin with a large scale questionnaire/survey of Special Olympians whereby alongside the collection of social demographic data respondents were asked a series of questions around, for example, their religious beliefs and/or spiritual practices, and the impact of their religious/spiritual beliefs/involvement on their relationships with: their families, fellow athletes, coaches, the public and/or the media. The questionnaire might be used to recruit respondents for the follow-up semi-structured interviews. In turn,

questionnaire findings may be used to discern a series of key themes and issues around which follow-up interviews might be structured. Here then we have the makings of a mixed method approach. The questionnaire survey is deployed as a quantitative measure to provide data from a large-scale population whilst participant observation and semi-structured interviews comprise the small-scale qualitative aspects of the study. In terms of the rationale behind the deployment of this kind of mixed methods design, the relative strengths and weaknesses of the quantitative and qualitative elements can be seen to be *offset* as part of the process of accessing different population sizes and different kinds of data whilst *triangulation* is evident by way of the fact that these three methods have the potential to provide a greater sense of corroboration than, say, purely qualitative methods. As for *completeness* one might argue that mixing methods in this way allows a more comprehensive account of respondent lives to be presented.

Clearly, arguments for the adoption of a mixed methods strategy surrounding notions of *triangulation*, *offset* and *completeness* may apply to a variety of research ventures. In turn, there are a host of practical reasons why the integration of methods may be viewed as appropriate and/or applicable such as: the need or desire to address different types of research questions, the need to use diverse sampling methods to access particular respondents or settings, or the need to generate different kinds of findings at different stages of the research process. At the same time researchers need to be mindful of the fact that mixed methods approaches should only be adopted where research questions necessitate such a strategy, where issues surrounding researcher competence are fully considered, and where project resourcing is adequate (see Bryman, 2012). With such considerations in place, we argue that the deployment of a mixed methods approach offers practical theologians (including those within the area of religion, disability and sport) extended scope in terms of the research problems, questions and issues that they may wish address.

Having spent some time considering contemporary academic debate around the widening of research approaches within the social sciences, we now turn our attentions to the specifics of research method and, in particular, focus group research. Our line of argument here is that because focus group method has come to be viewed as a key constituent of modern-day research design, and because it provides researchers with a further option in terms of data collection, it is necessary for those working in the area of Practical Theology to have a basic understanding of its scope and potential.

Focus Groups

As a method of data collection, focus groups have become an established and accepted feature of the range of methodological tools available to academic researchers (see Bloor, *et al*., 2001; Parker and Tritter, 2006). Their increasing popularity amongst social scientists is, at least in part, due to the fact that they are often perceived as more cost effective than some traditional methods (i.e. one-to-one semi-structured interviews) and adaptable to a range of research approaches and designs. The growing popularity of focus groups is also related to their more recent promotion amidst political and public debate insofar as since the early 1990s successive UK governments have been keen to promote them as a reliable way to canvass voter opinion.

Focus group techniques have been used in the social sciences since as far back as half a century ago and have facilitated the collection of data around a diverse range of topics (Merton and Kendall, 1946; Merton, Fiske and Kendall, 1956). Focus group participants are encouraged to discuss specific issues in order that shared lifestyle themes and patterns might emerge (Bloor, *et al*., 2001). Epistemologically speaking, and within the context of qualitative research *per se*, such aims would appear commensurate with a range of other data collection methods where gaining access to a sense of respondent commonality is the central

concern. Participants are asked to engage in focus groups because they have something in common with each other and something which the researcher is interested in – for example, a lifestyle circumstance or condition. Hence, the 'focus' aspect of the exercise is the premise upon which the collective meeting takes place (and is usually related to the 'focus' of the research being undertaken) and the driving force behind the key topic(s) to be addressed.

There are two issues to note at this point, one of which concerns the current popularity of focus group method, and the other which highlights the difference between traditional notions of the 'group interview' and contemporary usages of the term 'focus group'. As regards the first of these, it seems that for some qualitative researchers focus groups have become extremely popular as a method of data collection. Increasing pressure from research funding organisations to adopt 'mixed method' research strategies and the fact that focus groups generate far more data than a range of other methods in relation to face-to-face contact between researchers and participants, has added to this momentum. In this sense, focus groups appear to have become 'vogue' practice for researchers to the extent that they might be said to hold some kind of reverence or eminence amongst (and above) other research methods. To this end, the political status and profile of focus group research seems to have increased in appeal and it is now common for funders or stakeholders to request that researchers include focus groups within project design formulations.

A similarly pervasive trend in and around academic discussion of qualitative research methods is that focus groups are sometimes seen as synonymous with group interviews. Semi-structured 'one-to-one' and 'group interview' techniques have long since featured as fundamental components of qualitative research in a range of settings (Silverman, 2000; Robson, 2003; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Bryman, 2012). Whilst some researchers have maintained a well-established view of traditional 'group interview' techniques, others have proffered an allegiance to data collection via focus groups. Others still have confused

and conflated these two distinct methods. A number of scholars have argued that there is a fundamental difference between these two research techniques and that the critical point of distinction surrounds the role of the researcher and her/his relationship to the research participants (Smithson, 2000; Parker and Tritter, 2006). In group interviews the researcher adopts an 'investigative' role: asking questions, controlling the dynamics of group discussion, engaging in dialogue with specific participants. This is premised on the mechanics of one-to-one, qualitative, in-depth interviews being replicated on a broader (collective) scale. A relatively straightforward scenario ensues: the researcher asks questions, the respondents relay their 'answers' back to the researcher. In focus groups the dynamics are different. Here, the researcher plays the role of 'facilitator' or 'moderator'; that is, facilitator/moderator of group discussion *between participants*, not between her/himself and the participants. Hence, where focus groups are concerned, the researcher takes a peripheral, rather than a centre-stage role for the simple reason that it is the inter-relational dynamics of the participants that is important, not the communicative relationship between researcher and researched (see Kitzinger, 1994; Johnson, 1996). Whilst discussing the kinds of questioning strategies facilitators might deploy during focus group research, Bloor *et al*., (2001: 42-43) provide a clear explanation of how this arrangement works:

> In focus groups … the objective is not primarily to elicit the group's answers … but rather to stimulate discussion and thereby understand (through subsequent analysis) the meanings and norms which underlie those group answers. In group interviews the interviewer seeks answers, in focus groups the facilitator seeks group interaction.

In turn, of course, facilitators may work in pairs or be accompanied by an 'observer' who is present to manually record supplementary (observational) data relating to context, environment, personal gesture, posture and the like. As Bloor *et al*., (2001) go on to note, as far as group management roles are concerned, there are differences here with regard to focus groups in commercial and academic research settings. In the former, for example, 'professional facilitators' have often been used alongside additional personnel (sometimes an academic researcher) occupying a manual data collection role and/or acting as discussion summariser. In academic research however, this kind of arrangement has largely been superseded by single-handed focus group facilitation. Irrespective of who facilitates focus groups, the key point to be made here is that as part of the arsenal of data collection techniques available to the researcher (and providing that the rationale for their deployment is justifiable on epistemological grounds), they should be considered a useful resource for practical theologians and those examining sport, religion and disability, either in terms of mono or mixed method research designs.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been our intention within this essay to present a brief overview of the status of qualitative research within the context of Practical Theology and, more specifically, around the relationship between religion, disability and sport. Our aim has been to further encourage the practice of empirical research within the orbits of Practical Theology whilst at the same time challenging current assumptions regarding the scope and remit of the empirical methods and methodologies that are commonly endorsed within the sub-discipline. To this end, our overriding objective has been to provide an emancipatory framework around which practical theologians (including those working within the field of religion, disability and sport) may enhance their research ventures.

In terms of how this sense of emancipation might play out for researchers themselves, our hope is that future discussions around methodological expansion in Practical Theology might begin to incorporate a consideration of mixed methods research and the kinds of benefits that this may bring in relation to the depth, rigour and quality of the findings on offer. For example, researchers from the fields of 'clinical sport psychology' and 'religion and health' have recently investigated a range of psycho-social variables (mainly maladaptive) with regard to participation in competitive sports, using quantitative study designs (e.g., Storch, Storch and Adams, 2002; Storch *et al*., 2003; Zenic, Stipic and Sekulic, 2011; Cavar, Sekulic and Culjak, 2012; Sekulic *et al*., 2013). Similarly, in the US, there is a fast emerging literature that examines how promoting 'wellness' (well-being), 'fitness' and 'exercise' (sometimes including sports) in faith-based environments (normally Churches / Mega-churches), might help to combat the obesity pandemic, mental health problems and a host of related conditions and diseases (see Bopp and Webb, 2012; Baruth and Saunders, 2013; Bopp and Fallon, 2013; Bopp, Peterson and Webb, 2013; Marino and Whitt-Glover, 2013; Williams *et al*., 2013; Powell-Wiley *et al*., 2013). Again, the majority of these studies have quantitative designs, utilising, for example, survey instruments, psycho-metric scales and accelerometers, to collect and statistically analyse data. We argue that researchers in these two niche areas of enquiry, and those examining sport and religion more broadly, may consider combining methods (via mixed methods designs) where appropriate, to allow for a more in-depth understanding of the research questions under consideration.

Whilst discussions surrounding qualitative research inevitably raise questions over the contrasting epistemological assumptions underpinning Theology and those of the interpretative paradigm, mixed methods approaches present opportunities for closer allegiances to the nomothetic tradition and would thus appear to be more easily reconcilable. That said, mixed methods research necessarily brings with it a series of considerations

regarding task complexity, practical resourcing, and researcher competence and these issues need to be negotiated carefully.

As for the adoption of focus group method, we have argued that in one sense such practices are a necessary consequence of the modern-day world of social research. Focus groups are now an accepted and established part of public and political rhetoric and, as such, are commonly discussed by research funders and stakeholders alike. It has been our contention in this essay that focus groups are distinct from traditional notions of group interviewing and that the two should not be conflated or confused. Researchers may use focus groups without any real awareness of their complexity and without any clear epistemological rationale in place. Hence, one of intentions has been to point out that the deployment of focus groups requires us not only to understand their potential but also to understand how and why we might choose to include them as part of overall research strategy and design.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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