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To develop critical awareness of the key issues in undertaking research in work-based settings.

Module 2 - **BMPF7323**

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Introduction

This assignment, I will explore the philosophical foundations of research like ontology, epistemology and axiology, and evaluate its relevance for a voice practitioner researcher. I will also explore different research paradigms, research methodologies and methods relevant for a voice practitioner and critically reflect its application and few issues related to voice practise. A brief overview of the ethical issues relevant for insider research will be presented. The assignment will conclude with a discussion of research aspects for a voice practitioner stating my stance in it.

Philosophical frameworks for research

Researchers approach research with a set of assumptions depending on their worldview (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). Their worldview influences the nature of their inquiry, their beliefs, aims and methods (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). These philosophical principles, as Winter (2020b) states, will “help build a secure scaffold creating a cohesive flow of ideas”. Ontology, epistemology and axiology are the three facets that guide one’s worldview (Rosida et al., 2023) which I shall briefly discuss below.

Ontology refers to the nature of one’s beliefs about the nature of reality (Kawulich, 2015); whether the assumptions are a single verifiable truth or multiple, socially constructed realities (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). According to Moon and Blackman (2014) the two extremes in ontology are *realism* and *relativism*; Realists/ objectivists believe that there is one single, verifiable reality and that truth exists independently of human experience or perception. On the other hand, relativists believe that reality or truth is subjective (Leavy et al., 2020) shaped by the beliefs, ideas, experiences and interpretations of the viewer (O’gorman and MacIntosh, 2015, p. 57). Hence relativists believe in a multiple reality dependent on the perceptions of the inquirer (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007, p108).

Ontologically, voice research on the topic of ‘singing voice quality (timbre)’ can be looked at in two ways. Realists will study voice quality from an objective standpoint by measuring physiological aspects like laryngeal and vocal tract configuration (Omori et al., 1996) that contribute to the voice quality. Whereas a relativist voice researcher may believe that the perception of a pleasing vocal quality may be subjective depending on individual’s perception (Bourne and Kenny, 2016) and may want to study the perceptual understanding of good quality voice from different signers.

However, voice studies is referred to as ‘*interdisciplinary*’ (Kreiman and Sidtis, 2011; Mcnish, 2016) or ‘*transdisciplinary*’ (Eidsheim and Meizel, 2019; Winter, 2022). Such *inter/trans-disciplinary* studies need crossing of boundaries and forming bridges between unrelated disciplines (Stock and Burton, 2011). Voice as a “topic, object and practice”

(Radovanovic, 2020) being complex and is relational in practice (Scott, 2022) requires a collaborative or a relational approach. Therefore voice studies can be posited in *differentiated relational ontology*, a view of reality that attributes primacy to the relations between entities than the entities themselves (Wildman, 2006). A relational ontology can thus bridge the dichotomy (objectivity/ subjectivity) of these worldviews (Walsh, Böhme and Wamsler, 2020). It treats the nature/ culture (objectivity/ subjectivity) duality of voice as relational to each other without subsuming one into the other.

Epistemology is the 'process of knowing' (Spencer, Pryce and Walsh, 2020) and the ways used to investigate and uncover knowledge (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). It seeks to explain why some knowledge is considered true while others are not. While ontology focuses on 'what' of knowledge, epistemology focuses on the 'how' (Sol and Heng, 2022) of the knowledge creation. Abdul and Alharthi (2016) says that one's ontological beliefs will guide their epistemological suppositions. The broad branches of epistemology according to Kawulich (2015) are:

1. Objectivism - reality exists independent of the inquirer.
2. Subjectivism - reality is how one perceives or experiences it.
3. Constructivism - reality is dependent on the person and is socially constructed; reality and truth are co created.

Studying these epistemological stances, I observe that each of these claims are making objective claims about the nature of reality. This inescapability of objectivity I observe in the claims of each belief system, especially the objectivist and constructionist view, is "self-defeating" (Hobart, 1989, p.179). Although this warrants further in-depth personal study, for now, I agree with Guba and Lincoln (1994) who state that "these beliefs are basic" (p. 107) and "must simply be accepted on faith" (p.107) and it is impossible to prove its ultimate truthfulness.

Axiology is concerned with the values of a researcher and its influence in the research process (Spencer, Pryce and Walsh, 2020). The axiological stance of a researcher, as Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) states, determines the steps taken within research based on what is valuable and ethical; whether the researcher allows his/her emotions, expectations and values to influence and shape the research (value based) or does he/she take deliberate measures to distance themselves from the research at hand (value free) or identify, describe and even try to "bracket" (Spencer, Pryce and Walsh, 2020, p. 115) their values.

RESEARCH PARADIGMS

The responses to the ontological, epistemological and axiological questions give rise to paradigms. A paradigm can be thought of as a '*set of beliefs*' or a worldview or an *epistemological stance* (Morgan, 2007) which defines the nature of the world, the individual's position in that world and the ways one relates to that world (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Positivism

Positivism falls under objectivism, a belief in a single reality that exists independently of one's ability to comprehend it (Kawulich, 2015). It relies on scientific methods to test and verify and carry out research (Moon and Blackman, 2014). Positivists believe in a cause - effect relationship (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016) and argue for a research free of bias and subjectivity (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 12). However Charmaz (2006) says that maintaining neutrality is artificial as it ignores the researcher's accountability. Such neutrality may be difficult for a voice practitioner researcher, as their inquiry is generally shaped by their vested interest in the subject (Saidin, 2016) and practice (Winter, 2020b). Moreover, a positivist paradigm may be appropriate for studying the musicality, expressivity and artistry of a singer as those cannot be quantified (McCoy, 2012, p. 530).

Forbes (2024) observes dominance of science based positivist approach in many voice-related journals and in leading voice pedagogy books, an observation similarly supported by Winter (2022). A voice practitioner with a positivist approach may help in bridging theory and practice by scrutinising the evidence (Winter, 2022) and find relevant technical explanations to inform practice ((McCoy, 2012; Scott, 2022). However, voice practitioners reliant on voice science have to bear in mind that science is constantly evolving and producing new information (McCoy, 2012, 528), making the older knowledge obsolete or incomplete. Hence I suggest that a singing voice researcher with a positivist approach should be careful in executing these scientific truths in practice without elevating it to heights of irrefutability but to handle it with "touch of scepticism" (McCoy, 2012, p. 528).

Constructivism

Constructivism is a response to the over dominance of positivism (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016) and is ontologically and epistemologically opposed to it (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006; Winter, 2020b) This paradigm positions itself in a *relativist ontology* (there are multiple realities) and *subjectivist epistemology* (an understanding of world as other experience it) (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). This leads to multiple socially constructed realities (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016) which as Kawulich (2015) states are context dependent, culture bound and

shaped by history. Context specific nature of this paradigm is helpful for singing teacher-researchers whose practice is situated within the context to conduct observations. Winter (2022) says that a constructivist paradigm is useful for a voice studies practitioner's artistic endeavour. It enables voice practitioners to create new knowledge through the study of experience (Leiper, 2021) and improve their practice. This is evidenced in the work of Leiper (2021) who studied the benefits of group singing through the perceived experiences of singers' in a group, using open-ended questionnaires and focus group discussions. As each person in the group may perceive, experience and interact differently within the group, taking a constructivist approach will enable a researcher to get a good understanding of its members' experiences thereby informing and improving their practice. However one has to be mindful of the ethical considerations involved and check for quality criteria which are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p114).

Transformative Paradigm

Transformative paradigms address the issues of social justice and marginalised people (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Researchers adopting this paradigm are motivated by a social action agenda resulting in the transformation of the participants and researcher's life (Cresswell, 2003, p.9,10). Its ontological stance is grounded in historical realism (belief in a real world shaped by history) and the nature of the inquiry is to critique and transform the social, political, genetic, economic and cultural factors (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Such a study is evidenced in the work of Benson and Rosen (2024), who highlights the inequality and discrimination in the treatment of 'fat' singers in the singing voice studios. The authors' view of reality has been shaped by their lived experiences and by the experiences of 66 fat singers they interviewed. Shaped by their values of 'human dignity and equality' they see the bias against singers who are fat as social injustice. Hence they desire a change among the voice teachers and for the singing studios to become more inclusive and mindful of the marginalised identities, especially fat singers.

Pragmatism

Pragmatic paradigm as Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) mentions is founded in relativist ontology and relational epistemology (relationships in research is determined by what the researcher thinks appropriate to the research). Pragmatism doesn't subscribe to any particular philosophy or reality (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Instead it places the research question at

the centre (Creswell, 2003, p11; Saunders, 2019, p151) and addresses the question using multiple approaches. This allows freedom for the researcher not to stick to one particular framework but to choose “what works” (Morgan, 2007) for the problem under study. The researcher hence has philosophical flexibility to hold both objectivity (that comes from deductive approaches) and the subjective interpretation (that comes from the unique interpretations of the individuals in that world) at the same time (p. 71). This ‘intersubjectivity’ (p. 72) offers a very useful philosophical framework for a novice voice practitioner researcher to avoid “ideological dilemmas’ (Winter, 2020b) and navigate the daunting research process to derive practical outcomes (Winter, 2022). Considering that voice studies is an interdisciplinary subject (McNish, 2016), this intersubjectivity can be useful for a voice practitioner to make bridges between disciplines. As bricoleurs (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.6), voice practitioners can ‘mix and match’ to determine methods and strategies appropriate to the need of the study (Winter, 2022).

Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed methods Approaches

The terms quantitative and qualitative refers to the data collection methods and data analysis procedures (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). *Quantitative* methodology generates numerical data (Aliyu and Adamu, 2015). Valuing objectivity and neutrality (biases of the researcher are kept apart while researching) (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004) it tends more toward positivism (Bresler, 2022). Voice practitioner researchers with a positivist mindset seeking for objective truth or seeking data that is quantifiable, can use quantitative methods like questionnaires or surveys. However as Scott (2022) emphasises, a voice practitioner should consider the data collection methods appropriate to them and its feasibility.

Qualitative approach refers to data collection or data analysis procedure that generates non-numerical data like words, pictures or videos. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). It is often designed to assist practice (Bresler, 2022), taking into account the researcher's impressions and reactions (Aliyu and Adamu, 2015). As McCoy (2012) states a singer's musicality, expressivity or vocal beauty are aspects which cannot be quantified but can be described in words. A voice practitioner wanting to understand students' attitudes toward musical performance can use qualitative methods like open-ended questionnaires and unstructured interviews to get an understanding of the students' attitudes, beliefs or fears toward vocal performances. Hence a fully qualitative approach is helpful to explore deeply the experiences of singers (Forbes, 2024). Since the data is wordy in nature, qualitative

analysis is 'time consuming' (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004) and a practitioner must be mindful of the time consuming nature of it.

A *mixed method approach* is where both quantitative (numeric information) and qualitative data (text information) is collected and analysed (Creswell, 2003, p.20) either simultaneously or sequentially (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). Mixed methods are often a preferred approach for pragmatists (Sol and Heng, 2022) and by voice practitioners (Scott, 2022) as it provides a freedom to go back and forth between the qualitative (textual) and quantitative (numeric) data (Morgan, 2007).

As a singing teacher, to understand my students' awareness of vocal health and ill health, I believe a mixed method approach could be useful to study both quantitatively (the demographics, dietary practices and lifestyle habits of my singing students) using closed ended questionnaires, surveys and structured interviews; and qualitatively (students attitudes, perception of vocal health, motivation for maintain vocal health) using open ended questionnaires, semi/ unstructured interviews. Such a study is evidenced in the work of Nair et al., (2021) who has adopted mixed methods to study vocal health care among Hindustani classical singers. This enabled the authors to profile the singers' demographic details, lifestyle habits and dietary habits (quantitative data) along with the singers' understanding and perceptions of vocal nodules and its causes (qualitative). Through a mixed methods approach, a voice practitioner need not be restricted to a single approach but can gain knowledge by studying both measurable and descriptive aspects of the research question.

METHODOLOGY

The following methodologies are helpful in uncovering rich, deep qualitative findings for voice practitioners especially in a studio based teaching.

Phenomenological research is the study of the lived experiences of the participants (Papaioannou, 2023). Phenomenology requires the researcher to uncover and understand the biases and the presumptions he/ she brings to the research and 'bracket' it out (Spencer, Pryce and Walsh, 2020a). For a voice practitioner researcher to maintain this emotional neutrality and to operate outside their biases is a difficult task. However, this may suit a voice practitioner researcher whose axiological stance is toward distancing themselves and their influences from that which is studied to protect the integrity of the study.

Hermeneutics is regarded as the text-centred theory of understanding (Derong and Lin, 2009) human culture. It focuses on understanding human consciousness and the lived experiences through interpreting language (Laverty, 2003) and other forms like art, theatre,

music and dance (Winter, 2020a). As Lavery (2003) explains, meaning occurs through a circle of readings, reflexive writing and interpretations. Journaling is a one way to engage the hermeneutic circle, which “moves between the parts and the whole of the text” (p.30). Unlike phenomenology which requires the researchers to ‘bracket out’ their biases, hermeneutic philosophy views this pre-understanding of the researcher as enabling rather than constraining (Arnold and Fischer, 1994); thus the researcher's own experiences, biases and knowledge are brought into the research as a window or a starting point into the world of study (p.57).

Ethnography refers to the long-term observation of behaviours, actions and interactions among members of a cultural group within a specific place and time (Cox and Forbes, 2022). The researcher is effectively present in the world of study and observes, watches and listens (Buscatto, 2018, p2). This allows the researcher to deeply understand the environment, and to note the attitudes and behaviours of the people in that world (Pink and Morgan, 2013) by establishing trust. Data collection is through observations, informal conversations or formal interviews. Focussed ethnography (FE), focusses on a specific, contextually bound group that operates in a small private space. A voice practitioners’ private space, the one-on-one studio, is good for FE studies. Being reflexive and being vigilant in maintaining distance will avoid the bias the researcher may have.

METHODS

Sampling is a data collection technique that allows researchers to collect data only from a subgroup than all possible cases (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). In a *probability (representative) sampling*, which is mostly used in surveys, each case selected from the population has an equal chance of selection (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). In *non - probability sampling* the chance for the case to be selected is unknown (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). The samples are actively chosen and sampling techniques are subjective in nature (Scott, 2022). *Convenience sampling* is a process of collecting data from participants who are easily available (Rahi, 2017). For a singing teacher their students and their co-workers are within their access. This approach is helpful for most voice practitioners however, one should consider the relational and ethical issues. *Purposive Sampling* - involves purposeful selection of samples (Omona, 2013) who are a ‘direct fit’ (Scott, 2022) and who will be able to assist better for the study at hand (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2015). Omona (2013) remarks that this sampling adds more credibility when the sample size becomes large.

Surveys and Questionnaires is a great way to combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Nair et al., 2021) using closed (having predetermined answers) or open ended questions (allowing freedom of response for the participants). Questionnaires could be in the form of text or audio; either face to face, telephone or in written format (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p179). Questionnaire maintains participants anonymity thus avoiding the participants' bias in responding to seek favour or the fear of recriminations from the research (Leiper, 2021) which may be suitable for a voice researcher with an objective axiological stance.

Interviews involve asking questions either face-to-face or by telephone or online (Moser and Korstjens, 2017) to understand participants' perceptions.

Structured Interviews are questionnaires based on a standardised set of questions which are put forth uniformly in word and tone (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007) to give the same stimulus to each respondent. This method for a singing teacher might be of help for longitudinal studies (Lune and Berg, 2017) measuring the same data at multiple points in time (p.68). A simple question like 'how long were you able to practise this week?' asked over every weekly lesson will help understand the practice habits of singers over time.

Unstructured interviews explore in depth on the research topic with no predetermined set of questions. However it becomes challenging and time consuming to handle the enormity of the data and analyse it (Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R. & Jackson, 2012). *Semi- structured interviews* allow for the researcher to have a list of themes and questions and may choose to add or omit depending on the conversation. This will stop digression and help maintain the focus on the topic.

Observation is a data collection method through the "participation in and observation of a group or individuals" (Moser and Korstjens, 2017) over a time period. In *non-participant observation* the researcher is aloof from the setting and makes observations detached from the events (Winter, 2020a). On the other hand, a *participant observation*, as Lopez and Whitehead (2012) state, the researcher chooses to become an insider by being part of the system. Hence their research is subjective, being shaped and affected by their perceptions. Consequently, the very act of being observed can change the behaviour of the participant (called 'hawthorne effect') affecting the value of the findings (Barrett and Twycross, 2018). Being aware of one's bias and making measures to minimise it (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007) will help maintain reliability. Triangulation (cross checking of data using different sources, methods and investigators) (Flick, 2018) and negative case analysis

(searching for negative instances to develop insight) (Schwandt, 2007) are few ways of bringing in more validity to the research. A singing teacher participating in their lesson can observe over time the effectiveness of a technique adapted in the teaching studio with the participant's consent.

Field notes are a way of recording these observations which can be done as a chronological log of what is happening and its descriptions of what is observed (Barrett and Twycross, 2018), in the form written notes or visual stretches (Phillippi and Lauderdale, 2018), audio or video format, recording the conversations with participants, without affecting or interrupting the flow or the participant. A critical reflection soon after the interview or observation is better for analysing the emotions and the non- verbal behaviours of the participants and also to critically reflect on the researchers to assess their performance, biases and feelings (Watt, 2015). Note - taking may be a helpful tool for a voice practitioner's research as it will assist in their memory especially when working with many students, and can help in the researchers' reflexivity as noted by Watt (2015). As a singing teacher I often visit my student class lesson records to inform my practice and plan future action.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION FOR AN INSIDER RESEARCH

Conducting research involves considering ethical aspects of the research especially when the approach is qualitative, by being mindful of the interpersonal relational nature of the study (Mertens, 2018). Practitioner research presents unique challenges as the researcher is an insider (part of the system) in relation to the research project and must take into account the nature and aim of the research whether it is morally and ethically right; the social and economic implications and the sustainability of it (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p27). The researchers working with institutions should be aware of the institution's ethical criteria (Denscombe, 2017); its implications in the selection of data collection and analysis; and the time taken for the approval process (Mertens, 2018). Since qualitative research involves working with people the researcher should strive to respect the rights of the participant, more so for practitioner researchers (Mertens, 2018). A voice practitioner researcher must consider the power dynamics involved when their students or colleagues are participants (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p31).

The Nuremberg code 1947 emphasises that participants participation should be voluntary and with informed consent. Participants must also have the freedom to withdraw from the study if they wish (Fischer, 2005) and the research should be conducted with integrity complying to the law of the land (Denscombe, 2017). The ethical criteria for ethical conduct

are credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and authenticity as laid by Lincoln and Guba (Mertens, 2018).

Voice practitioner researchers are Insider researchers who are driven by passion for the topic of study that interests them and would benefit them (Saidin, 2016). The criticism for insider research is the lack of objectivity. Contrarily Merton (1972) argues that an outsider may not be able to understand and justify the nature of the topic under study as the research topic is unrelated to him. I infer that both these views differ in that one values objectivity more than the other. The epistemological and axiological stance of the voice researcher may play a crucial role here depending on the degree they value objectivity and neutrality in their research (Mertens, 2018).

Being an insider researcher may also facilitate more participation from participants (Saidin, 2016) because of the established trust. Prior subject knowledge (DeVerteuil, 2004) and sharing common background, values and experiences as that of the participants (Shaffir, 1999) gives an advantageous position for an insider researcher especially if study is about the culture of the group (DeVerteuil, 2004). However, this raises the issue of reliability, bias and prejudice, as these very similarities can also affect the interpretations of the data, which may be influenced by the prior knowledge and experiences of the insider researcher (Saidin, 2016) and researcher's relationship with the participants. Being aware of one's bias and making measures to minimise it (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007) will help maintain reliability. Triangulation (cross checking of data using different sources, methods and investigators) (Flick, 2018) and negative case analysis (searching for negative instances to develop insight) (Schwandt, 2007) are few ways of bringing in more validity to the research.

CONCLUSION

Upon reflection I have come to understand that I value the objective nature of truth. However I also understand that value and meaning can be obtained through people's perceptions of an experience or event and that in case there can be multi realities. As a voice practitioner often my research question arises from practice and I look for theories relevant for practice (Winter, 2022). Since the choice of methodology will depend on the research questions being asked (Braun and Clarke 2013) a pragmatic lens seems most suitable for voice research. As voice studies is transdisciplinary (Forbes, 2024), I contend that it is difficult to fit the research into one mould or method. Hence I also consider a 'custom-fit' (Papaioannou, 2023) bricoleur methodology, where different theories and methods are brought together to offer a thick description of the subject under study.

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