

A Critical Evaluation of Work-Based Research

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1. Introduction

This paper outlines the research topic, organizational context and applied nature of the study. It critically evaluates the research paradigm, methodology and methods, highlighting their alignment with the study's objectives. Ethical considerations specific to insider research are addressed, culminating in findings and recommendations for future research.

2. Research Topic

This research explores self-efficacy, an individual's belief in their ability to successfully perform a task (Bandura, 1977). It examines how direct reports experience and develop self-efficacy in response to their line manager's actions within a business context. The study aims to understand "how" and "why" specific managerial behaviours foster self-efficacy, providing deeper insights into the dynamics between leadership practices and employee development.

The benefit of this research lies in its potential to equip managers with the knowledge and practical tools to cultivate self-efficacy in their direct reports. By fostering this belief, managers can enhance both individual and organizational effectiveness.

3. Organizational Context

Bell Canada Enterprises (BCE), Canada's largest telecommunications company with over 42,000 employees, is transitioning into a technology-driven organization. This transformation, coupled with workforce reductions, has resulted in the loss of personnel and institutional knowledge, highlighting the critical role of effective leadership in supporting employees during change.

This research examines how managerial behaviours at BCE can foster self-efficacy to help employees adapt and thrive. With seven years of experience as a coach and instructor in BCE's leadership programs, the researcher is well-positioned to explore this topic while addressing potential biases and ethical considerations.

4. Research Context

Research is commonly divided into applied and basic types. Applied research addresses practical problems, while basic research expands knowledge without immediate application (Bentley, Gulbrandsen and Kyvik, 2015). This study is classified as applied research, as it aims to generate actionable insights into elevating self-efficacy in direct reports.

As a social science, it focuses on understanding human behaviour (Spade Survey, 2023). The research is both exploratory, seeking to uncover how managerial behaviours influence self-efficacy and descriptive, examining the specific actions of line managers that foster this belief in direct reports (Gray, 2022, pp. 38-39).

The study demonstrates originality by applying established self-efficacy theory to a new organizational context. Phillips and Pugh (2005, p. 62) highlight that originality can stem from reinterpreting known material and generating fresh insights tailored to specific settings or using a new technique (Francis, 1976).

Conducted as a small-scale study requiring a few hundred hours, this research focuses on two or three key research questions directly related to self-efficacy (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 35). It qualifies as insider research, as the researcher holds a professional contractual relationship with BCE. Insider research offers unique

advantages, such as access to organizational insights, but also presents challenges in maintaining objectivity, as neither insider nor outsider roles are inherently superior (Hammersley, 1993).

5. Research Paradigm

A research paradigm provides a framework of beliefs and values that shape perspectives on reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology), guiding theoretical and methodological approaches (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 82). In social science, terminology can be inconsistent or contradictory requiring researchers to clarify their philosophical stance (Crotty, 1998, p. 1).

This study adopts a paradigm that aligns with its focus on understanding human behaviour and subjective experiences within an organizational setting. The following sections outline the study's ontological, epistemological and reasoning approaches.

6. Ontological Approach

Ontology is the study of reality and its fundamental characteristics (Gray, 2022, p. 23). James (2024) identifies two primary ontological positions: objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism views reality as external and independent of individuals (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p. 38), while subjectivism considers reality to be shaped by individual perspectives and experiences (Gray, 2022, p. 24). This research adopts a subjectivist stance, acknowledging that participants' unique perceptions and experiences of managerial behaviours shape their self-efficacy.

7. Epistemological Approach

Epistemology examines how knowledge is gathered and interpreted to understand the social world (Degree Doctor, 2023). Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2010, p. 64) outline key epistemological approaches, including positivism, which emphasizes objectivity and detachment, and interpretivism, which focuses on understanding human behaviour within social contexts. This study adopts an interpretivist stance, prioritizing participants' lived experiences within the organizational environment to explore "how" and "why" managerial behaviours influence self-efficacy.

8. Inductive and Deductive Reasoning

Building on the ontological and epistemological foundations, researchers employ inductive or deductive reasoning to guide knowledge gathering and interpretation. Dewey (no date, p. 80) describes induction as progressing from specific observations to broader generalizations, whereas deduction applies universal principles to specific cases. Aligned with the study's interpretivist and subjectivist stance, this research adopts an inductive approach, drawing on participants' experiences to develop a deeper and broader understanding of how managerial behaviours foster self-efficacy within BCE.

9. Research Design

Research design serves as the overarching framework that integrates data collection, measurement and analysis, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives (Gray, 2022, p. 144). It encompasses the research methodology, which establishes the philosophical foundation and informs the approach to understanding and interpreting knowledge, and

the research methods, which are the specific techniques chosen to collect and analyze data in a manner consistent with the study's aims.

10. Research Methodology

Research methodology defines the process of acquiring knowledge and is shaped by the researcher's ontological and epistemological perspectives (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 86). Collis and Hussey (2013, p. 59) describe it as a holistic framework that encompassing various methods- quantitative, qualitative or a combination-selected based on the research's objectives and practical considerations.

The following sections will critically evaluate the methodological approaches considered for this study, including quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodologies. Each approach will be analyzed in relation to its alignment with the study's ontological and epistemological foundations and its suitability for examining how managerial behaviours foster self-efficacy within BCE.

10.1. Quantitative Methodology

Quantitative methodology involves the representation of data in numerical form (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 66) and is grounded in an objectivist ontology and positivist epistemology, emphasizing replicability and deductive reasoning to test theories (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 84). It focuses on identifying facts and causal relationships while prioritizing control, objectivity, reliability and generalizability (Oakley, 1999, quoted in Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 67).

Quantitative methodologies often employ experimental and survey approaches to investigate relationships between variables while maintaining researcher independence

(Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, pp. 178-180). Experiments involve manipulating an independent variable under controlled conditions, allowing comparisons between an experimental group and a control group (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 74).

Surveys, distinct from questionnaires, represent another key quantitative methodology used to gather data for comparative analysis (Davies and Hughes, 2014, p. 55).

Key advantages of quantitative methodology include its ability to handle large-scale datasets (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 67) and its perceived validity among stakeholders (Adams and Hill, 2007). It also simplifies the analysis of numerical data, enabling population-level inferences. However, it has notable limitations, such as a lack of flexibility that restricts the exploration of nuanced or in-depth topics and requires participants to conform to the researcher's predetermined structure (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 92). Additionally, its reliance on predefined analytical frameworks can further limit adaptability (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 20).

10.2. Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methodologies prioritize understanding participants' meanings and relationships, using words and images rather than numbers (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 179). Rooted in a subjectivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, this approach focuses on exploring perceptions and experiences of human behaviour, often employing inductive reasoning to develop theories (Bell and Waters, 2018, p. 24). Unlike quantitative methodologies, qualitative research involves the researcher as an active participant in the study (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 180).

Common qualitative methodologies include phenomenology, hermeneutics and grounded theory (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 87). Phenomenology examines lived experiences, hermeneutics interprets texts within their context and grounded theory builds theories from participant data (Degree Doctor, 2024). Additional approaches include action research, an iterative problem-solving process (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 180); case studies, which explore phenomena in-depth within real-life contexts; ethnography, which studies group culture and narrative inquiry, which captures participants' stories (Yin, 2018, p. 3).

The advantages of qualitative research include its flexibility in simultaneously collecting, analyzing and interpreting data (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 20). It is particularly effective in real-world contexts and excels at exploring complex constructs such as emotions and beliefs in-depth (Bell and Waters, 2018, p. 26). However, qualitative research has notable limitations. These include concerns over validity (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 67), non-generalizable findings, reduced statistical power, the potential for researcher bias and practical challenges such as time-intensive processes and complex data analysis (Bell and Waters, 2018, p. 26).

10.3. **Mixed-Methodology**

Mixed-methodology research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, utilizing either deductive or inductive reasoning to support theory development (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 181). Bell and Waters (2018, p. 25) highlight that this approach provides significant advantages, including a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic and the ability to mitigate the limitations inherent in single-method

designs. They further emphasize that triangulation enhances research validity by examining a topic from multiple perspectives through diverse methods.

However, mixed-methodology research also poses challenges. The integration of distinct approaches can lead to inconsistencies in application and reporting, potentially undermining overall validity and rigour (Bressan *et al.*, 2016).

10.4. Choosing a Methodology

Gray (2022, p. 32) explains that methodologies are designed to either uncover external truths (positivist) or explore multiple perspectives (interpretivist). Holliday (2007, p. 7) critiques quantitative research for its inability to fully capture the complexities of human behaviour while Bressan *et al.* (2016) highlights that mixed-methodology can lead to inconsistencies in application, a challenge that is particularly pronounced for beginner researchers (McKenna, Copnell and Smith, 2020).

This study adopts an interpretivist stance to examine self-efficacy as a social phenomenon shaped by individual perceptions and experiences, making a qualitative methodology the most appropriate choice. Employing this approach at BCE involves reviewing prior organizational development research, particularly on leadership, to draw lessons that inform the study. While qualitative research is often limited in generalizability, Bassey (1999, p. 12) introduces the concept of "fuzzy generalizations", suggesting that findings can still offer insights applicable to similar organizational contexts.

11. Research Methods

With qualitative research established as the methodology, selecting an appropriate research method is a critical step in designing the self-efficacy study. Collis and Hussey (2013, p. 59) define a method as the specific technique used for data collection and analysis. Costley, Elliott and Gibbs (2010, p. 92) highlight that the chosen method must align with the methodological framework, be practical and ethically feasible and provide the necessary depth and scope of data to be fit-for-purpose.

While some methodologies naturally align with specific methods, Costley, Elliott and Gibbs (2010, p. 83) note that the relationship between methodology and method can sometimes be more complex, requiring careful consideration of the study's aims and context.

11.1. Eliminated Methods

To determine the most suitable research method for exploring self-efficacy, various techniques were assessed for their alignment with the study's objectives, interpretivist perspective and practical constraints. The following methods were excluded due to their limitations and incompatibility with the study's aims.

11.1.1. *Experiment*

Experiments test causal relationships by manipulating variables in controlled settings (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 74). However, self-efficacy, rooted in subjective experiences, misaligns with the research aims. Additionally, experiments are impractical in organizational contexts due to the challenges of controlling confounding variables and replicating realistic conditions (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 97).

11.1.2. Structured and Unstructured Interviews

Structured interviews, with fixed, scripted questions and limited flexibility for follow-up or clarification, are unsuitable for exploring the nuanced, subjective nature of self-efficacy (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 93). Unstructured interviews, while allowing participants to share experiences freely, are time-intensive and prone to off-topic discussions, making it challenging to identify patterns and draw meaningful, study-aligned conclusions (p. 94).

11.1.3. Action Research

Action research focuses on problem-solving and implementing change through organizational collaboration (Costello, 2003, p. 5). This approach is unsuitable for this study, as self-efficacy is not identified as a problem at BCE. Furthermore, leadership uncertainty within the organizational development team makes it unlikely that this participatory method would be prioritized.

11.2. Methods Under Consideration

To explore self-efficacy effectively, two primary methods are considered: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Each is evaluated for its practical feasibility within BCE's organizational context and its potential to provide relevant insights.

11.2.1. Questionnaire Method

A self-administered questionnaire is considered a potential method for the self-efficacy research. Aldridge and Levine (2001, p. 5) highlight the uniqueness of each questionnaire, which requires careful design, incorporating various question types such as multiple-choice, scales, rankings and open-ended formats (Davies and Hughes,

2014, pp. 72-77). Commonly used in small-scale social science research, questionnaires can be administered through mail, telephone, face-to-face, email or digital platforms (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 77, 181).

Bell and Waters (2018, p. 31) emphasize the importance of sampling based on key characteristics to ensure data accurately represents the broader population, thereby enhancing validity and relevance. Questionnaires offer several advantages: they are simple to administer, enable efficient collection of large volumes of data (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 77) and are cost-effective, reliable and valid (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p. 553). Additionally, they promote inclusivity by accommodating participants who prefer written responses (Letherby, 2004).

However, questionnaires also have limitations. They often yield unrepresentative data, as respondents who consent may have vested interests in the topic (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 94). Blaxter, Hughes and Tights (2010, p. 77) note that responses can lack nuance, be misinterpreted or contain inaccuracies. They further argue that the focus on breadth over depth weakens alignment with the study's purpose and findings represent only a snapshot in time, offering limited insights into deeper issues.

For the BCE study, questionnaires are a practical option for reaching the geographically dispersed workforce via electronic platforms. This method ensures accessibility and scalability but may require additional time for managing responses and analysis.

Sampling criteria are critical to ensure representation of BCE's 42,000 employees.

Piloting the questionnaire, as suggested by Bell and Waters (2018, p. 32), helps refine design and ensure relevant data collection. While questionnaires effectively capture the

"what," "where," "when" and "how" of self-efficacy, don't address adequately explore the "why", posing a key limitation.

11.2.2. Semi-structured Interview Method

Semi-structured interviews emerge as a suitable method for exploring self-efficacy. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018, p. 598) describe them as tools for testing hypotheses and exploring participants' mindsets, knowledge and principles using predefined topics with primarily open-ended questions. They also emphasize the flexibility of this method, which allows phrasing and order to adapt to the interview context (p. 603). Their adaptability makes them particularly effective for addressing complex or nuanced topics (Gray, 2022, p. 409). Semi-structured interviews can be conducted one-on-one or in group settings, delivered in-person, by phone or virtually (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 174).

Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for capturing detailed, rich data and understanding participant experiences. They provide insights into "how" and "why" behaviours occur (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 597). Open-ended responses enable participants to articulate their thoughts freely, enhancing understanding (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 93). These interviews also acknowledge participants' experiences, promoting engagement and deeper insights (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 23) while reducing misunderstandings by clarifying ambiguous responses (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p. 9).

However, semi-structured interviews present challenges. They are labor-intensive, limiting the number of participants within a given timeframe (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs,

2010, p. 9). Potential biases from the interviewer or participants may affect validity, especially in sensitive discussions, highlighting the importance of measures to mitigate bias (Gray, 2022 pp. 413-414). Additionally, participants may hesitate to provide negative feedback if confidentiality is not guaranteed (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 597). Findings may also lack generalizability, a common limitation of this technique (Gray, 2022, p. 410).

For the BCE study, semi-structured interviews are a strong choice due to their ability to explore complex feelings and attitudes. Their flexibility supports in-depth probing and clarification of responses (Gray, 2022, p. 408). Considering BCE's workforce of 42,000 and Rowley's (2012) recommendation of conducting approximately 12 interviews of 30 minutes for beginner researchers, establishing strong sampling principles is critical for reliable outcomes. A key decision is whether to record interviews or rely on notes (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p. 176), influenced by BCE's organizational culture and the sensitivity of self-efficacy discussions, particularly concerning feedback about participants' managers.

12. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are fundamental to research integrity, as outlined in the Concordat to Support Research Integrity, endorsed by UK universities (Universities UK, 2019). Its five commitments include maintaining rigorous standards, adhering to ethical and legal guidelines, fostering governance-driven integrity, addressing misconduct transparently and enhancing research quality through regular reviews. The University of

Wales Trinity Saint David reinforces these principles through its Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice (2022).

Gray (2022, p. 83) identifies four ethical principles applicable to all research: avoiding harm, ensuring informed consent, respecting privacy and preventing deception. These principles must guide the research process at every stage (Brooks, te Riele and Maguire, 2014, p. 2-3).

In this insider research on self-efficacy, several ethical considerations are crucial. Ensuring participants are free from coercion to consent or pressure to withdraw is paramount (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2022, p. 153). Confidentiality, anonymity and non-traceability are essential, particularly for participants in smaller business units and their line managers. Addressing bias in sample selection, question framing and data interpretation is crucial to maintain validity and reliability. Managing power dynamics between the researcher, participants and BCE is critical to fostering a psychologically safe environment where participants feel secure sharing openly without concerns. Additionally, given that the study examines participant's perceptions of self-efficacy in relation to their line managers, careful consideration of these dynamics is vital. If interviews are conducted, a non-judgmental approach is required to ensure participants feel comfortable (Denscombe, 2014, p. 265).

Several mitigating strategies address these ethical challenges. Data from participants who feel coerced is excluded to uphold ethical standards. Smaller business units are combined to protect anonymity and triangulation of research questions and data interpretation through independent review minimizes bias. The researcher's arms-length relationship with BCE mitigates power dynamics compared to an employee role.

Transparency and clear communication with line managers are maintained, while their consent is not required due to prior authorization. For interviews, the researcher's expertise as a trained coach ensures a non-judgmental approach to questioning.

13. Conclusion

The self-efficacy research at BCE adopts a qualitative methodology within an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing subjective experiences to understand “how” and “why” managerial behaviours influence self-efficacy. Using inductive reasoning, it generates insights into leadership behaviours and their impact on self-efficacy, aligning with its applied nature.

Semi-structured interviews are identified as the most suitable method, allowing the exploration of nuanced behaviours and attitudes while addressing practical constraints. Their adaptability to digital and in-person formats ensures engagement across BCE's dispersed workforce. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, bias mitigation and power dynamics, are central to ensuring participant well-being and research validity.

14. Recommendations

Twelve 30-minute interviews, supported by a robust sampling framework, should be conducted to ensure reliability and validity. Semi-structured interviews should serve as the primary method for exploring self-efficacy, as they uncover complex feelings and attitudes, offering nuanced insights into “how” and “why” behaviours occur. Their flexibility and adaptability make them well-suited for BCE's geographically dispersed workforce, enabling in-depth engagement through both digital and in-person formats.

A carefully designed sampling strategy should represent BCE's diverse workforce and ensure findings are reliable. Ethical measures, including numeric coding for anonymity, merging smaller business units for sampling and conducting interviews with a trained coach to ensure a non-judgmental approach, must safeguard confidentiality and manage power dynamics.

To complement the depth of interviews, the feasibility of a follow-up questionnaire should be explored. This approach could refine questions based on interview insights, broadening data collection and enhancing the validity and generalizability of findings while triangulating results.

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