

What methodological approaches and research methods may be effective to gather data within complex work-based settings, particularly with consideration to practitioner research within voice related fields? Discuss ethical considerations as well as challenges associated with insider research within these contexts.

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Introduction

As a singing teacher and singer new to research methodology, this essay will act as a springboard into the academic subject and assist the development of my practitioner research. With the knowledge acquired in this module, I intend to gain a strong basis for my future research in the vocal health field. Chafe (2024) suggests the importance of dissecting one's own ontological and epistemological positions (one's perception of reality and knowledge) before designing a project, since these positions will likely lead to the selection of the methodology (Chafe, 2024; Sol and Heng, 2022; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, the assignment will begin by briefly outlining the overarching methodologies (quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods), before looking at three paradigms (Positivism, Constructivism and Pragmatism) and discussing how their philosophical positions differ. I will then argue my preference for qualitative methodology for my initial research and offer explanations. Research designs appropriate for qualitative enquiry will therefore be assessed: Grounded Theory, Phenomenology and Ethnography, as well as methods such as Interviews, Focus Groups and Observations. The essay will then summarise research ethics and insider research, which is highly significant for practitioner-researchers working within their field (Scott, 2022). It is necessary to understand how personal experience may colour my research, especially when delving into the vocal health field as a singer with first-hand experience of vocal health issues.

An Overview of Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Quantitative research focuses on what statistical data can tell us by scrutinising it for patterns which are inferential (Patel and Patel, 2019; Watson, 2014); its strength lies in its ability to prove or disprove a theory by using dependent or independent variables (Cosgrove, 2020; Watson, 2014). Heavy focus on statistics makes quantitative research well positioned for large sample sizes and drawing conclusions across vast social groups or populations (Lim, 2024). However, its focus on numerical findings may limit insight into context-specific human experiences (Masoodi, 2017; Degu & Yigzaw, 2006).

In contrast, qualitative research is useful for exploring individual or "human-centred" experiences (Lim, 2024, p.1). It is less likely to represent extensive populations, but instead centres on specific, complex phenomena (Lim, 2024; Masoodi, 2017; Degu & Yigzaw, 2006). However, qualitative research is often time-consuming and resource-heavy due to interviews being the main data collection method (Lim, 2024). The outcome also relies more heavily on the researcher's ability to extract meaning from large and often complex data sets (Lim, 2024).

Comparatively, qualitative research is a newer phenomenon, only becoming more accepted in the late 1900s (Brinkmann, Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2020). Whereas quantitative finds its roots in the natural sciences, qualitative research better corresponds with the social sciences (Brinkmann, Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2020; Degu and Yigzaw, 2006). A possible explanation could be that nuanced human behaviour is less quantifiable through statistical analysis (Masoodi, 2017; Degu and Yigzaw, 2006). Consequently, qualitative research took longer to be recognised as 'scientific' and therefore widely respected (Brinkmann et al., 2020; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Another difference exists in reasoning approaches. Quantitative research often uses deductive reasoning, which usually starts with a hypothesis and seeks to verify it as true or false (Lim, 2024; Baran, 2019). In contrast, qualitative research often employs inductive reasoning, beginning without "preconceived theories" (Lim, 2024, p.6) and allowing for a more "exploratory" (Baran, 2019, p.29) and amendable approach (Kara, n.d.).

Mixed Methods:

Mixed methods research combines both methodologies in a single study and so utilises numerous methods to answer one question (Baran, 2019). The justification for mixed methods depends on the research question but is particularly warranted if using both methodologies will provide richer theory evidence (Baran, 2019). This gives the researcher more options but may also require more time and diligence to marry the methodological distinctions (Cosgrove, 2020).

Next, an overview of paradigms will be given, later delving into how positivism, constructivism and pragmatism align with the differing methodologies.

Paradigms and Their Significance When Conducting Research

A Paradigm is a "belief system or world view" (Pretorius, 2024; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p8; Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p105) that can steer the researcher's enquiry within a study (Pretorius, 2024; Killam, 2013). Selecting a paradigm for research is an essential step that helps define how the study should be directed (Pretorius, 2024; Chafe, 2024; Cosgrove, 2020; Brown and Dueñas, 2019). Guba and Lincoln (1994) state that paradigms are made up of three main pillars: **Ontology**, **Epistemology** and **Methodology**. However, **Axiology** is often suggested to be an additional element (Pretorius, 2024; Brown and Dueñas, 2019; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Killam, 2013).

Ontology has been described as the philosophy of *being* and in research relates to the researcher's view of reality (Sol and Heng, 2022).

Epistemology deals with “theory of knowledge” and is a term originating in the 1800s (Sol and Heng, 2022, p80). It questions how ‘truth’ and knowledge can be certified (Sol and Heng, 2022; Spencer, Pryce and Walsh, 2020).

Axiology is concerned with value, (what is considered valuable) (Sol and Heng, 2022; Kryukov, Kicheev, and Sotnikova, 2021; Antlová et al, 2015). This also comprises ethics (moral values) and aesthetics (beauty values) (Sol and Heng, 2022; Killam, 2013).

Methodology refers to the structured conducting of scientific research (Patel and Patel, 2019). There are various approaches, each with steps to ultimately shed light on the enquiry (Patel and Patel, 2019). Specific methodologies will be discussed later.

Below, a comparison of three paradigms: Positivism, Constructivism and Pragmatism and their philosophical components will be offered.

Positivism

Positivism has been at the forefront of scientific research for over 400 years (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). It supports the hypothetico-deductive model based on a hypothesis that can be proven or disproven through statistical procedures (Park, 2020).

Ontology: Positivism argues that reality is objective and fixed, regardless of personal viewpoints (Pretorius, 2024).

Epistemology: Knowledge is acquired through observation and truth is discovered through objective measurement (Pretorius, 2024; Cosgrove, 2019).

Axiology: Positivism values objective research (Chafe, 2024) that is independent of the researcher and aims to avoid bias (Pretorius, 2024; Cosgrove, 2019).

Methodology: Positivism is well aligned to quantitative methodology since it values statistical measurement (Pretorius, 2024).

Constructivism

The Constructivist paradigm, attributed to philosopher Dewey, (Hermanto and Jayana, 2020) in contrast to Positivism believes in subjective, multiple realities rather than one reality (Pretorius, 2024).

Ontology: Constructivists believe each person will have differing perceptions of reality, dependent on their individual experience and how they interact with the world (Pretorius, 2024; Brown and Dueñas, 2019; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

Epistemology: Knowledge is believed to be a social construction developed by the individual (Pretorius, 2024; Brown and Dueñas, 2019; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

Axiology: Personal values impact knowledge construction (Antlová et al, 2015; Pretorius, 2024) and therefore the researcher can never be fully removed from their study. Self-reflection and subjectivity are encouraged (Pretorius, 2024).

Methodology: Constructivism is often seen in qualitative studies because of the emphasis on an inductive process (Shannon-Baker, 2023).

Pragmatism

Major contributors to pragmatism were William James, Charles Peirce and John Dewey (Kelly and Cordeiro, 2020). The paradigm allows the researcher a higher level of flexibility and focuses on catalysing positive change (Pretorius, 2024) through a focus on “what-works” (Kelly and Cordeiro, 2020).

Ontology: Pragmatists believe that reality is ever-changing and interpreted depending on individual experience (Pretorius, 2024; Scott, 2022).

Epistemology: Knowledge is imperfect/incomplete and is developed through experiences (Pretorius, 2024). There is emphasis on the practical in pragmatism and a belief that knowledge should drive enquiry (Pretorius, 2024; Kelly and Cordeiro, 2020).

Axiology: Creating practical, impactful outcomes from research is valued highly and helps direct the research (Pretorius, 2024). This also explains why flexibility is encouraged to achieve best results by whichever means necessary (Scott, 2022). Pragmatists often value the opportunity to bring about social change and “solve real-world problems” (Pretorius, 2024, p2706).

Methodology: Optimum research methodologies are the ones that serve the issue best (Pretorius, 2024; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). They are therefore heavily dependent on the topic, and a mix of qualitative and quantitative methodologies are appropriate (Pretorius, 2024; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

The findings above will support my selection of a paradigm, but whether this should be decided on before the research question or afterwards is not universally acknowledged. Killam (2013, p.10) suggests that *“the best approach to research always depends on the question you are trying to answer”*. This may reveal a pragmatic epistemological stance, as she appears to prioritise “what-works” best for the predefined question (Kelly and Cordeiro, 2020). Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.105) instead write: *“Questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm...the basic belief system... that guides the investigator...in choices of method [and in] ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways.”* This emphasises the

paradigm as the initial force of the investigation, yet, how the research question relates to this is not detailed. It could be that the paradigm dictates how a question is framed, since Guba and Lincoln argue it influences all aspects of research. Their ideas are more philosophical in approach (Kelle and Reith, 2023) than Killam's. I am more attracted to the pragmatic way of thinking, and as a singing teacher uncovering "what works" (Kelly and Cordeiro, 2020) for a specific student is something I am faced with frequently.

In work-based settings, Winter (2020) advocates that Pragmatism and Constructivism are well suited to voice research, being a highly individual, subjective and personal endeavour (Scott, 2022; Miller, 1996). I recognise that with experience of vocal health issues, it would be impossible to be entirely objective (Paparo, 2022), especially since my interest in the subject (the knowledge I value to uncover through research) was sparked by my own situation. This suggests that a purely positivist perspective would be at odds with my experience, which instead aligns well with the constructivist's axiological stance that supports subjectivity, reflexivity, and celebrates the value that the researcher's involvement can bring (Pretorius, 2024; Scott, 2022). Qualitative methodology, seen used in both Constructivism and Pragmatism, is well positioned for capturing the nuance of human experience, emotion and language – elements intrinsic to my work as a singing teacher (Winter, 2020). With that in mind, I have decided to focus the next section solely on qualitative research designs. Additionally, the size constraints of this essay would not allow for a broader range to be investigated.

Research Design: Methodologies

Grounded Theory (GT) was first introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) (Lim, 2024) and is a methodology used in many fields including sociology and healthcare (Bryant, 2020; Creswell, 2007; Starks and Trinidad, 2007). Whilst GT *can* be used for both quantitative and qualitative data collection (Noble and Mitchell, 2016), Glaser and Strauss (1967) advocate for its suitability to qualitative research since it is inductive by nature, developing theory directly from data as it emerges rather than starting with a theory (as in deductive processes) (Lim, 2024). In application this involves data collection and analysis *simultaneously*, allowing for interview or focus group questions to be fine-tuned as theory grows (Noble and Mitchell, 2016; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This has the potential to offer deep insight when working with individuals on detailed and personal phenomena (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, this way of working has also been criticised as unrealistic, since to begin enquiry without

prior knowledge or presumptions is impractical and may lead to tenuous theory generation (Bryant, 2020).

A positive example of GT in voice research is Warren, Fancourt and Wiseman's (2019) study on group singing's impact on cancer patients. They followed typical GT steps, starting by scrutinising the data using open coding, dividing into categories, then applying axial coding (where connections between categories can be identified) and finally ascertaining the core category (the main phenomena) with which a theory can be established in a process called selective coding (Warren, Fancourt and Wiseman, 2019; Noble and Mitchell, 2016). In GT, once initial categories have been discovered, theoretical sampling is employed where the researcher selects the next avenue of exploration (Noble and Mitchell, 2016) and recruits participants for new samples who may have differing perspectives (Noble and Mitchell, 2016; Starks and Trinidad, 2007). Individuals can be continually added until theoretical saturation is reached (when a complete picture is developed) (Noble and Mitchell, 2016; Starks and Trinidad, 2007).

In Warren, Fancourt and Wiseman's (2019) study, main themes such as 'building resilience' and 'social support' emerged in participant feedback, leading to theory generation that group singing provides psychological support for cancer patients. This was theoretically saturated over their two-year study (Warren, Fancourt and Wiseman, 2019) demonstrating that GT can provide a thorough investigation to theory. Idealistically, working purposefully towards theoretical saturation is a major strength of GT, since it leads to a more thorough enforcing or rebutting of a theory (Noble and Mitchell, 2016; Gelling, 2011; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, *when* theoretical saturation is reached is determined by the researcher and in past studies this has been criticised as being indiscriminate (Bryant, 2020). This emphasises the need to properly justify the decision to conclude research (Bryant, 2020). Additionally, to effectively saturate a theory, lengthy research periods appear necessary (Warren, Fancourt and Wiseman, 2019), which may imply unsuitability to shorter-term research or for projects with less resource (DelveTool, 2021).

Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology grounded in philosophy from the early 1900s (Starks and Trinidad, 2007) and heavily influenced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Gelling, 2011). Similarly to Grounded Theory, it focuses on lived experience and is therefore appropriate for measuring individual, specific experiences and emotions (Paparo, 2022; Gelling, 2011; Given, 2008). Understanding or meaning is developed through discovering a person's "embodied perception" or subjective experience of

a situation/phenomenon (Starks and Trinidad, 2007, p1373). This is seen in Paparo's (2022) phenomenological study focused on gaining personal participant insight on how the Feldenkrais Method impacts their singing.

Phenomenological data collection is usually conducted through interviews alone, whereas GT utilises all available means of data collection (Gelling, 2011), (including interviews, observational methods, focus groups and inclusion of prior research) (Noble and Mitchell, 2016; Gelling, 2011). However, in the case of Paparo's study (2022), interviews, questionnaires and journals were used to give richer insight, suggesting interviews are not the only option for Phenomenological studies. In contrast to GT which may be more driven towards new theory generation, Phenomenology may focus more on revealing truth and describing meaning of shared experiences (Masoodi, 2017; Starks and Trinidad, 2007). While a strength of Phenomenology is its ability to uncover intricate details about a phenomenon, it has been criticised for being too prejudiced and non-generalisable (Ayton, 2023). Furthermore, bias could pose an issue since interviews entail direct researcher involvement in the study (Scott, 2022). Bracketing is commonly used in Phenomenology to mitigate this, which involves the researcher outlining and putting aside their positionality, experience and biases before undertaking the study (Ayton, 2023; Mertens, 2018). Paparo (2022) demonstrates this by including a document that acknowledges his personal experience as a Feldenkrais practitioner. He explains how he "bracketed" his own perspectives to be able to interpret the data more objectively (Paparo, 2022, p.544).

Ethnography is a qualitative methodology that originates from the fields of anthropology and sociology (Lim, 2024; Creswell, 2007) and is largely attributed to the anthropologist Malinowski (Lim, 2024; Harrison, 2020). Ethnographic research involves participation and observation of people's lives, as Malinowski put it: "grasping the native's point of view" (Harrison, 2020, p335; on Malinowski, 1966). Ethnographic researchers conduct fieldwork, spending physical time in a location with a people to understand their culture (Harrison, 2020; Goulding, 2004). To be well executed, observation must take place over months or years, and the researcher must be embedded within the lives under scrutiny (Lim, 2024; Harrison, 2020; Goulding, 2004). This allows for complex and nuanced discoveries that are realised only through cultural immersion. However, this makes it less suitable for short studies and inexperienced researchers (Harrison, 2020).

Harkness (2014) presented an ethnographic study of singing in Christian South Korea after extensive integration and fieldwork in their choral tradition (Chong, 2015; Harkness, 2014).

This kind of study was well suited to ethnography since the aim was to understand the specific patterns within this culture (Creswell, 2007).

Methods:

Interviews, whether conducted online or in person, involve spending individual or dyadic time with the participant/s (Foley et al, 2021; Wilson 2012) and are commonly used in qualitative research (Karatsareas, 2022; Foley et al, 2021). This is likely because asking probing questions may elicit sharing of specific experience pertaining to the researcher's study (Karatsareas, 2022; Wilson, 2012), (a common goal of qualitative research) (Lim, 2024; Masoodi, 2017; Degu and Yigzaw, 2006). However, there are various types of interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured, which may be more appropriate for different methodologies. Structured interviews often take the form of surveys and use standardised questions where no deviation from the script is permitted (Journalism University, 2023; Wilson, 2012). This may align better with quantitative research (Wilson, 2012) since it provides an efficient way to generate data and allows for clear analysis of large sample sizes (Journalism University, 2023). However, structured interviews leave little room for nuance or deeper insight and therefore qualitative methodologies align better with semi-structured or unstructured interviews (Brinkmann, 2022). These allow the researcher to be led by the information/topics brought up by the participant (Wilson, 2012). This is particularly true of unstructured interviews, which allow the conversation to go in any direction but can make data difficult to compare (Tang, 2021; Wilson, 2012). Unstructured interviews are open-ended, where participants may talk at length without time restriction (Tang, 2021; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This is often seen in GT as a starting point of theoretical sampling, especially when there is limited information on the phenomenon under study (Foley et al, 2021). This allows the researcher a broad initial enquiry and the participant's insights can shape the path towards theory (Foley et al, 2021). Semi-structured interviews (that encourage flexibility whilst maintaining clear questioning), may then be utilised to refine that emerging theory (Karatsareas, 2022; Foley et al, 2021). Despite many positives, interviews can be susceptible to researcher bias resulting in leading questions that shape the participant's responses (Foley et al, 2021). Therefore, researchers need to remain mindful to avoid insinuating opinion or revealing their preconceived theory (Foley et al, 2021).

Focus Groups (FGs) are a type of interview that engage participants in group discussion around a topic or 'focus' determined by the researcher (Tang, 2021; Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2020) (and were utilised in Warren, Fancourt and Wiseman's (2019) study discussed previously). Two sociologists Merton and Kendall (pioneers in the development of FGs) advocated for their integration into otherwise purely quantitative studies. They argued that FGs could act as the initial means of theory development and then the theories could be assessed through measurable means (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2020; Baran, 2019). This was an early demonstration of mixed methods research (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2020). FG discussions can lead to rich insight and an abundance of data (Gill and Baillie, 2018). They are frequently performed in conjunction with other methods involved in a study, for example interviews and observations (Gill and Baillie, 2018). FGs are suggested by Gill and Baillie (2018) to ideally include 3-14 participants and by Tang (2021), 7-10. As an average, this may suggest 8-9 is the best to aim for since too few can lead to insufficient data, yet too many can lead to disorder (Gill and Baillie, 2018). Common criticisms of FGs are the difficulty of analysis when dealing with multiple perspectives and differentiating between individual voices and group opinions (Lim, 2024; John Hopkins University, n.d). They are also only appropriate for certain subjects, since participants must feel comfortable in the discussions (Tang; 2021; Gill and Baillie, 2018). Furthermore, having the researcher oversee conversation can stimulate a phenomenon called the Hawthorn effect, where observation influences behaviour causing inauthentic interaction (Lim, 2024; Scott, 2022). Unsurprisingly, this can also be seen in Observation as a method (Lim, 2024) (discussed next).

Observation, as the term suggests, involves witnessing subjects in activity or discussion, placing emphasis on what can be inferred from behaviour (Patel and Patel, 2019). A strength of observations is that the researcher is afforded direct contact with the situation under scrutiny and therefore may be able to gather rich data (Lim, 2024; Tang, 2021). However, researcher bias could play a role since the observer will naturally have unconscious opinions on what they observe, making replicable results harder to achieve (Lim, 2024; Tang, 2021). Participants may be self-conscious during observation and therefore behave abnormally (consequences of the Hawthorn effect), skewing data findings (Lim, 2024). However, the method is ideally suited to Ethnography, where observation is the core component, the significance being that Ethnographic studies require long-term observation and interaction within a culture (Susanto et al, 2024). With time, participants may develop a sense of ease when being observed (Azarova, 2023).

These methods are applicable to qualitative studies and often utilised within the methodologies outlined previously (Lim, 2024). Due to the person-focused, subjective nature of qualitative research, ethics are a key consideration (Lim, 2024).

Ethics

There are three main principles when conducting ethical research commonly cited as the 'Belmont Principles', which are: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001). The Economic and Social Research Council is the body that dictates ethical guidelines in the UK (Basit, 2013), the most obvious being that no participant is harmed by the research and that the results obtained are trustworthy (Tang, 2021; Basit, 2013). Participant informed consent is paramount for all research and subjects must be made aware of all aspects of a study (Scott, 2022). They should sign a consent form detailing how their data will be used, the confidentiality of what they share, and their right to withdraw at any time (Lim, 2024; Scott, 2022). Different methods may warrant different aspects to be included within the form, for example in the case of recorded interviews exact usage must be specified (University of Wolverhampton, n.d). Consent within an ethnographic study offers a distinct example, since due to time-frame consent may need to be continually updated (Lim, 2024). This is because observation at this level is highly intimate, and participant boundaries may be ever-changing (Lim, 2024). Ethical attention must also be given to participant recruitment (Lim, 2024). This includes engaging subjects in a considerate manner, being up-front about everything involved and ensuring there is no element of manipulation to achieve participation (Lim, 2024).

Insider Research

Insider-researchers have shared insight into the phenomena under the lens (Holmes, 2020). Singing teachers/singers researching in the vocal pedagogy field will therefore fall under this category automatically (Winter, 2020). To navigate this, an understanding of potential strengths and pitfalls are required, especially since there has been much debate on whether research should be from an emic (insider) or etic (outsider) perspective (Holmes, 2020). Positives include the potential to draw on personal experiences that encourage deeper interpretation of findings (Basit, 2012), more perceptive lines of questioning and better comprehension of subject-specific language (Holmes, 2020). The latter feels particularly relevant to voice, since singing-teachers frequently work with specific and niche language when discussing vocal concepts. However, the etic perspective critiques the emic position as too prone to bias and myopic findings (Holmes, 2020). Without an outside influence on

enquiry, important, basic information may not be shared by participants because it is assumed already apparent to the insider-researcher (and it may not be) (Holmes, 2020). Considering this, to avoid bias tarnishing the credibility of insider work, reflexivity must be practiced at all stages by examining one's own positionality and experience, and regularly documenting these reflections (Scott, 2022; Basit, 2013).

Conclusion

This assignment has been thought-provoking, providing a valuable initial overview of research methodology. The discoveries will be highly beneficial when conducting my own research, however it has also exposed how much deeper one must explore the topic once the question has been selected. In theory, I strongly agree with the constructivist's ontological view that individuals possess subjective perceptions of reality, which are undoubtably informed by personal experience (Pretorius, 2024). This also resonates strongly within my field of work. However, the question this has stirred for me is whether I truly call this "reality" or do I see this merely as personal perception of one overarching, fixed reality? This ontological debate attracts me to pragmatism, which may better accommodate contradictions between my positivist ontological instincts and my constructivist or pragmatist epistemological stance (Pretorius, 2024). Pragmatism's endorsement of a mixed methods approach therefore feels attractive as it can marry these two worlds (Winter, 2020). However, I do not yet feel adept to dealing with figures, so my early research is likely to be based in constructivism, focusing solely on qualitative methodology whilst I learn more about statistical data. This assignment has left me questioning exactly how my future research in vocal health will materialise. Further reading and self-reflection will help refine my proposal for research in the vocal health field.

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