

Critically evaluate a range of methodological approaches, research designs, and research methods appropriate to gather data from complex work-based settings, with due consideration to research ethics and issues of insider research.

Introduction

The asking and answering of questions is fundamental to any teaching or research practice. The expectations surrounding this act, however, are not the same in the moment of teaching as they are in the process of carrying out primary research. Although in work-based research these two contexts are ideally dialogic (Winter, 2020b), the tools and concepts that serve to answer a question in the classroom alone may not be sufficient to produce credible, useful research. My background is in performance and teaching, and while this develops skills that are relevant to research (planning, reflection, engaging with literature, ethical behaviour, an active interest in problem solving), the standards of good practice are organised differently in research settings. Research has its own sets of interplaying concepts that affect how problems are understood and viewed, what questions are asked, what can feasibly be answered, what data is relevant, and what codes ethical practice should be followed (Morgan, 2007). This essay is concerned with developing a solid understanding and level of criticality of a range of methodological approaches, research designs, methods and ethical considerations that contribute to understanding and producing practice based research.

I will first discuss underlying concepts and frameworks that form the basis of many research approaches (such as ontology, epistemology, and research paradigms), progressing on to methodological approaches and designs, methods, and ethical considerations. I will apply this discussion to examples of research within the field of singing and voice to better evaluate the utility of these concepts and structures, and thus how I might apply them in my own practice.

Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology, our concept of the nature of reality, and Epistemology, our concept of how knowledge is constructed, are active aspects of designing, creating, and understanding primary research (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). A clear understanding of ontological and epistemological positions as researchers is important for the identification of personal bias, for the selection of methodologies and methods relevant to the research question, for clear communication about findings and how they were interpreted, and ultimately for the creation of research that contributes to the field and is credible to our peers (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Assumptions about reality and knowledge, for researchers as individuals and as communities in the same field, gives rise to various frameworks of problem solving commonly called "Paradigms", which can differ enormously in their definitions of

credible and valid research (Morgan, 2007; Winter, 2020a). Morgan (2007) notes that in extreme instances, adherence to certain paradigms can result in methodologies and methods being chosen to support ontological and epistemological concerns, rather than the concerns of the research question. Winter (2020b) points out that the paradigm chosen can even impact on a study's publishing prospects. Thus it is useful to understand how ontology and epistemology appear in research, as they can affect virtually every aspect of how a study is conceptualised, constructed, interpreted, and disseminated. As theories about truth and knowledge are closely interlinked with research paradigms, I will analyse how they appear and impact on research as part of a discussion about some of the leading paradigms, citing examples and ultimately drawing conclusions about relevance to my own practice.

Paradigms

The debate about the utility of two paradigms in particular, Positivism and Social Constructionism, has been well documented (Morgan, 2007; Winter, 2020b). Debate about the repercussions of their respective ontological and epistemological standpoints has resulted in the creation of further paradigms to encompass different manifestations of truth and knowledge (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012; Winter, 2020b). This section will take a range of paradigms in turn, illustrating their philosophical underpinnings and how they have appeared in different studies.

Positivism and Post-Positivism

Positivism was previously "the standard philosophical view of natural science" (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.21). To this day, the definitions of rigour that we find within positivism are still those that attract more research funding (Winter, 2020b), even if many of its central ideas have been re-evaluated to form the post-positivist paradigm (Morgan, 2007). Within positivism, ontologically truth is objective and constant (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). The epistemological stance is that knowledge is objective, observable, measurable and predictable (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Knowledge is discovered through the repeated testing of hypotheses to expose causal laws that govern being, like gravity, and it is often done using quantitative methods. Within this paradigm, the researcher is objective. They design and carry out the research but do not take part directly in that research, nor do they impose values onto the research outside of what is being measured (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). In post-positivism, the attainability of objectivity is critiqued, so while it holds to the same ontological and epistemological assumptions, bias on the part of the researcher is acknowledged, and research results are treated through the lens of critical realism, where "reality cannot be known with certainty" (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012, p.8). This paradigm is largely associated with quantitative methods, and is thought to be particularly suited to a study that wishes to test the hypotheses of a general principle where there is objective data to be collected (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012).

The post-positivist paradigm appears in a study about twang quality by Perta, Bae and Obert (2020). An assumption of objective truth is present in the research aim to find “the exact physiologic under-pinnings of twang quality” (p.1). Epistemologically, the approach of testing and retesting a hypothesis is highlighted by the literature review, and by the careful noting of exactly what conditions and instruments have been used. The design strives for objectivity, with MRI imaging analysed statistically, and findings about the pharynx, larynx and vellum presented through numerical data. The analysis of the findings does not seek to make value judgements, but states the physiological differences neutrally, making no claims to conclusive results, but rather clarifying the extent to which the findings may be said to support the hypothesis.

Constructivism

Rather than one single objective, knowable reality, the ontological view in constructivism is that reality is both personally and socially constructed, that a multiplicity of realities and truths exist simultaneously, and that reality may not be knowable directly (Winter, 2020a). Epistemologically, knowledge is subjective and dependent on the minds, cultures, and contexts of the study participants, so many different kinds of information can “find space as legitimate knowledge” (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012, p.10). Within this paradigm, the researcher is subjective, and their interpretation of the data is an important factor in how research is designed and analysed (Winter 2020b). Robson and McCartan (2016) note that this paradigm is a good one to select if our primary goal is to understand the perception of a community, group, or individuals about a particular subject. It is often used in social sciences and in practitioner based research (Robson and McCartan, 2016; Winter 2020b).

Freer (2016) displays an ontological assumption that multiple, co-constructed truths exist in a rich social context, as stated in his intention to “gather the perspectives of current choristers about singing, choral music, choral pedagogy and the male adolescent changing voice” (p.76). Context is provided about the school environment, and participants were interviewed in the school, consistent the assumption of knowledge being revealed in the minds and contexts of the community under study. The subjectivity inherent in this process was managed in several ways; boys were given the opportunity to review transcripts and provide corrections, software was used to transcribe, encode and analyse data, and Grounded Theory provided the framework for the analysis. Two graduate students replicated the analysis process to check the outcomes.

Pragmatism

In this paradigm, the research question is the most important concern (Morgan, 2007). The ontological basis is that reality is constantly changing and negotiable, and therefore intersubjective - oscillating between objectivity and subjectivity (Feilzer, 2010), and the epistemological stance follows: knowledge is what is useful, and this can be intersubjective and contextual (Winter, 2020; Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Feilzer, 2010). People and research conditions can be inherently unpredictable and highly nuanced, and pragmatism allows for the methodologies and methods from any relevant paradigm to be used (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Winter (2020b) notes that this paradigm is useful to practitioner researchers, as its focus on problem solving enables us to carry out research that is immediately useful and applicable to our working environment.

Green et. al (2013) demonstrates an ontological perspective of truth as transient: the study seeks to identify the "varied and complex" range of styles "currently most requested" in Broadway auditions - an acknowledgment that demands on such singers are ever-changing (p.324). Epistemologically, knowledge is intersubjective in this study. The sampling and methods take an objective approach; 1238 postings are collected and analysed in a statistical manner. Subjectivity is also present; listings are treated as textual data and the themes analysed to provide understandings of what is required of the applicants. Contextual information for these demands is provided throughout the study. The information in this study is highly practical for practitioners seeking to understand the demands place on CCM singers, and support them in meeting those demands.

Applications to my practice

I agree with the pragmatic viewpoint that the chosen paradigm should be the framework that best answers the question at hand. Studies in the post-positivist paradigm like Perta, Bae and Obert (2020) provide valuable information about twang quality, and it is important that we have some idea of how much of the technique we teach has a basis in the research literature. However, as someone who is likely to carry out research in an educational setting, I believe the social and transient nature of the topics I work with lend themselves more readily to constructivism, such as in the study carried out by Frier (2016). I remain open to the use of positivist and constructivist ontologies and epistemologies.

Research Design and Methodology

A suitable research design must give due consideration to the goals of the research, our perceptions of what data will evidence an answer effectively, sampling, time-frames for different stages of the research, the position and biases of researchers, ethics, funding, and other available resources (Coen, Mannion, Morrison, 2018). Methodology is a process selected to guide and

structure the research (philosophically and operationally) in a manner that is consistent with the above concerns (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). The methodology chosen can fall into several broad categories: quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, each of which is commonly associated with a particular paradigm (Robson and McCartan, 2016). As in choosing a research paradigm, the methodological approach should be the one that enables us to best investigate the phenomena, or answer the question (Morgan, 2007).

Quantitative methodology

Quantitative methodologies are traditionally associated with positivist and post-positivist paradigms. Strongly influenced by the natural sciences, they utilise deductive logic (the theory precedes the research), focusing on what can be precisely measured and quantified (in a numerical format), with fixed, pre-specified research designs and statistical analysis of the data (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Detailed accounts of how research has been carried out aid with replication and thus the reliability of a study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), while demonstrating that the method used to measure the intended phenomenon is appropriate, contributing to the validity of the study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Coen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018). The researcher strives to be objective, and the environment is often as standardised as possible to limit external influences so that the cause of a phenomena can be isolated (Winter, 2020a; Robson and McCartan, 2016). Ultimately, the results of this kind of methodology seeks to outline reliable, generalisable causal relationships, so that certain behaviours or phenomena can be predicted (Coen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018).

Surveys are a quantitative methodology where a set of questions are presented to a sample of a certain population to gather numerical data related to thoughts and behaviours of people about a certain topic, and used to draw general conclusions about a broader population in a statistical analysis (Bell and Waters, 2018). Experiments are also quantitative; they seek to test a pre-defined hypothesis through the manipulation of a specific variable factor related to that hypothesis, and use this information for predictive purposes, analysing and reporting findings in a statistical manner (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative methodology

Qualitative methodologies are associated with constructivism, and utilise inductive logic (the theory develops after or during the period of research), focus on non-numerical data (like interviews), seeking out the perceived meanings and contexts of a phenomenon in situ (Coen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018). The research design is often flexible throughout the study, and subjectivity on the part of the researcher and the participant are valued (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Researchers must be open, receptive, and reflexive (analytical about their position within the work) in order to elicit personal accounts from their research participants and to discern meanings upon which

theories can be built (Robson and McCartan, 2016). The validity (or usefulness) of this kind of methodology comes from the clarity and density of information collected in its natural setting, inductive reasoning, and the themes that emerge from the voices of the respondents (Coen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018).

Ethnography traditionally sees researchers integrate into the environment they are researching in order to give critical insights into the culture of the social group under study, and process of both participating and observing are expected on the part of the researcher, otherwise known as participant-observation (Shah, 2007). In Phenomenology, the researcher strives for objectivity, and theories and ideas evolve from the subjective observations and understandings of the participants themselves (Winter, 2020a). Hermeneutics use textual analysis that oscillates constantly between specific aspects of a phenomena (the parts) and more general, broad concepts or structures (the whole), in a cyclical process that allows the researcher to gain greater clarity of both nuances and larger structures in a qualitative study (Smith, 2007).

Mixed methods

Mixed methods research allows for quantitative and qualitative methodologies to be combined when “important aspects of the research problem may have been ignored by relying on a single approach” (Von Zweck, Paterson and Pentland, 2008) It has strong foundational links to several paradigms, such as Positivism, Constructivism, Pragmatism, the transformative paradigm (Coen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018). There are several types: convergent mixed method studies are where both quantitative and qualitative data are merged to present a detailed picture of the research, Explanatory sequential mixed methods use surveys to inform a follow up period of qualitative research, while Exploratory sequential mixed methods reverse this process (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Application to my practice

When looking at examples of experiments like the quantitative study on phonatory and resonatory traits in different sub-styles of belting by Sundberg, Thalén and Popeil (2010), the combined knowledge of the researchers, the equipment used, and the access to resources seem to be beyond what I can achieve as a novice researcher. Constructing a survey would be preferable as as I have some idea of different populations I might be able to explore using my own educational networks, but I believe I would need significant study and support to be able to execute out the statistical of analysis expected. Qualitative methodologies appear to be labour-intensive analytically, but I am better equipped to carry out such study given my interpersonal skills, verbal ability, and interest in different frameworks of analysing texts as an English literature graduate. My current focus of developing my own practice is more compatible with qualitative methods; Poulton

(2021), utilises autoethnographical records as a source of data to analyse the utility of virtue ethics in the management of insider research, but also to direct his own professional development. A study of this nature would appeal to me and help me to develop as a practitioner and a researcher.

Methods

Methods are the ways in which we collect data, and how we manage and analyse that data (Coen, Mannion, Morrison, 2018). Once we have selected the paradigm most pertinent to our research question, we must then choose complimentary methods that will provide the kind of data best suited to answer that question (Feilzer, 2010).

Literature review

Literature reviews establish what has previously been published about a specific topic, and can form the basis of a researcher's argument for the relevance of their research question, and their expertise in the topic (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Literature reviews can also form entire studies unto themselves, which aggregate data in a large field of study to aid practitioners and academics in drawing conclusions to help them in their practice. (Rhoades, 2011). Whatever the purpose of the literature review, they must be systematic and rigorous in terms of the criteria for inclusion or exclusion of materials, often using keywords and the research question in combination to achieve this end (Coen, Mannion, Morrison, 2018). Researchers must be careful to note biases and the tendency to publish only those articles with conclusive reviews; seeking out grey literature (unpublished papers, theses, dissertations, government publications and documents, conference papers) can help to provide a balanced view (Rhoades, 2011).

Interviews

Interviews can be with individuals or focus groups, and they are the "most common methods of data collection in qualitative research" (Gill et al., 2008, p.295). Opdenakker (2006) notes that interviews can take place in a range of settings - in person, over the phone, and online services. Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, but no matter the format a transcription of the interview must be completed as a permanent record, which aids in analysis (Gill et al., 2008). In this way, the analysis of the data will be a textual process, where frameworks like hermeneutics may be effectively applied to reveal themes and patterns in the data (Von Zweck, Paterson and Pentland, 2008).

Structured interviews often amount to a live questionnaire, and while they are efficient, they may offer little scope for depth of understanding; they are useful if there is a preconceived theory in mind (Gill et al., 2008). Unstructured interviews with open questions are helpful where more depth of understanding is required, as the participant is free to share and the researcher free to follow up,

but are more time-intensive across the processes of interview itself, transcription, and analysis (Gill et al., 2008, Hoey, 2014). Semi-structured interviews fall in-between, and will utilise an interview guide, with some general topics and questions determined in advance, but there is room for spontaneous questions and follow up with the interviewee on areas of interest (Robson and McCartan, 2016). In this way, these interview formats express positivist, constructionist and pragmatist viewpoints respectively.

Observation: Field Notes and Research Journals

Central to qualitative studies are the subjective observations of the researcher, which are often captured through field notes and research journals (Shah, 2007, . This provides a text that can be analysed using inductive logic to reveal patterns and themes present in the community under study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). They circumvent issues of misremembering, provide rich contextual data, and create permanent records that can be consulted after the event (Coen, Mannion and Morrison; 2018). They can also supplement transcriptions of interviews or focus groups to provide relevant unspoken data and information about context (Gill et al, 2008). Journals and field notes are also a place to practice reflexivity; analyse biases and assumptions, and to build “preliminary understandings, to develop interpretations, and eventually to reach their conclusions” - in this way such notes can contain both data and analysis of data (Hoey, 2014, p.6). Such reflexivity is crucial for the validity of the study and substantive theories like hermeneutic analysis can be used as a sound theoretical underpinning to draw out patterns and important findings (Von Zweck, Paterson and Pentland, 2008).

Questionnaires

This quantitative method appears frequently in surveys, using a set of questions based on a pre-defined theory to provide “numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population.” (Bell and Waters, 2018; Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p.54). Questionnaires are also used as methods of measurement in psychotherapeutic settings and research to gauge the severity of symptoms in individuals undergoing treatment, such as The Cognitive Fusion Questionnaire, designed to measure cognitive fusion (the level to which our sense of self is fused with our thinking) (Gillanders et al, 2014). Studies like LoVetri and Weekly (2003) adopt the former model, aiming to produce generalisable information about the proportion of the singing teacher population in the US teaching Contemporary Commercial Music singing styles. This method requires unambiguous, user-friendly language and presentation with the later process of data analysis alongside the ethical duties towards the respondents being considered in the formation of the questions (Bell and Waters, 2018). While surveys can be easily distributed online, researchers need to be prepared to follow up as much like interviews, asynchronous communication can lead to distractions for respondents, resulting in incomplete surveys and lost data (Opdenakker, 2006). A pilot of the survey ahead of time can reveal problematic questions,

issues with clarity of presentation, and provide an opportunity for the researcher to run a preliminary analysis of the results to determine that the questions will yield usable data (Bell and Waters, 2018).

Application to practice

Of the methods discussed, I believe that literature review and research journals would be immediately useful to me, but the skills to conduct interviews and surveys would be valuable to develop as my research practice grows. I consider myself to be early in my practice as a singing teacher, so time spent in the process of reviewing literature brings clarity to my practice and develops my understanding. I feel the process of literature helps me to identify gaps both in my practice and in the research, which may form the basis of future projects. Further to this, a research journal would support me in developing my reflexivity and my ability to uncover themes and patterns about my working environment. I am very interested in using a framework like hermeneutics to provide theoretical support for this reflection. I have been inspired by many of qualitative studies I have encountered seeking to understand the perspectives of individuals and communities about singing (such as LoVetri and Weekly, 2003; Frier, 2016; Clift and Morrison, 2011), and I note the importance of interviews and surveys in their work. I believe that in time I may be able to develop the skills to carry out such work, especially as my understanding of and engagement with research literature continues.

Research ethics

Researchers have an ethical obligation to “ensure the rights, privacy, and welfare of the people and communities that form the focus of their studies” (Berg, 2001. p.39). Many institutions have ethical guidelines and committees to safeguard wellbeing and mitigate risk; the researcher should also consider laws and requirements of external institutions to ensure compliance (Bell and Waters, 2018). Standard processes like ethical committee reviews, obtaining informed consent, protecting anonymity and confidentiality of participant data, clarifying the right of the participant to withdraw from research, and acknowledging pre-existing bias on the part of the researcher, all help to prevent harm to participants. Concern for their wellbeing should permeate the entire process of the conception and design of the research, and extend beyond the point of direct contact; it should be present in the reporting of findings, considering how publication may affect their well-being (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Poulton’s reflections on carrying out research in his workplace demonstrate a clear concern with the privacy of participants throughout the process, using journals and discussions with supervisors to reflect on and resolve ethical issues (Poulton, 2021). In particular, he highlights this practice as it appears during the process of selecting participants (sampling), and the presentation of the data, with much consideration given to the inclusion or

exclusion of quotes that might compromise anonymity, thereby keeping participants safe from any potentially negative repercussions of disclosures in interview.

Ethical practices can present challenges for researchers. The process of attaining informed consent, for example, has many nuances that can hamper the researcher - working with vulnerable groups may bring up questions about the nature of consent, and gatekeepers can deny access to participants (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Breen (2007) highlights an example of the latter, where a potential participant's assistant asked for indicative questions before scheduling an interview, but then "informed me that the questions were 'not very good', and so she decided to answer the questions herself via email" (Breen, 2007, p. 167). Participants exercising their right to withdraw from studies can skew research, lower the sample size of already small groups, or impact on the clarity of research findings. In a pilot study for the efficacy of ACT for singing students managing MPA by Juncos et al. (2017), originally 9 students signed up to participate, but 2 withdrew, and of the participants who completed the 12 session course of treatment, one did not complete questionnaires used to quantify results at post-treatment or follow up.

In advance of carrying out research, I will need to create a proposal of my intended research that outlines the ethical implications of the work, the proposed design, methodology, and methods I intend to use. Any necessary supporting documentation from external institutions will need to be included, including DBS checks if I wish to work with vulnerable groups, and risk assessments. This will be formally submitted to an Ethical committee for review. The committee will assess the level of risk and the feasibility of the research and make a formal decision to grant approval or not. The research may only proceed when the approval process is complete and permission formally granted.

Insider research

The researcher's relationship to the site of inquiry and the participants can be that of an "outsider" or an "insider" (Breen, 2007). For an outsider critical distance from the participants and environment is already in place, objectivity in collecting and analysing data is more achievable. Its basis for validity is rooted in quantitative, positivist approaches (Coen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018). However, an outsider's sensitivity to the nuances of the environment may be limited, potentially negatively impacting the data collected in terms of the pertinence of the questions asked, and the depth of context attainable. Ethically, their remove from the environment can negatively impact their assessment of the effects their research has on participants or communities (Breen 2007). The insider is a member of the community, institution or workplace under study, and access to people and environments that would not be available to an outsider give them the opportunity to collect rich data *in situ*, and to frame their work in a way that has practical applications for those in the community being researched. Its basis for validity is in qualitative

methodologies and constructivist principles, with subjectivity balanced by reflexive practice and transparency (Hoey, 2014; Coen, Mannion, and Morrison, 2018). This positionally presents challenges; creating objectivity and critical distance needs careful management by the researcher, often through the use of journals, meetings with supervisors, and structured reflexive framework, such as we see in Poulton, (2021). The researchers position can also bring assumptions and biases into the process of data collection - perhaps when interviewing a colleague, implicit knowledge may not be clearly articulated and thus not captured as data (Breen, 2007).

Conclusions and overall application to practice

As a singing teacher with a private practice, working freelance with other music organisations, and with an employment history working with organisations locally in Norfolk, UK and across Ireland, I believe I have ample networks to draw on for future research projects. Currently in my journey, deepening my understanding of the voice across a range of topics like breathing, belting, and pedagogy is my first priority, and so I believe the way in which I engage with the areas of research explored in this essay will develop over time. In the immediate term (the next 18 months), my key priorities are my own professional development in terms of knowledge and relevant skill sets for research; I believe settings where I am an insider to the research environment will be the most accessible. Qualitative methodologies and designs, and related methods like literature reviews and research journalling would help me to develop my criticality, my ability to report findings and apply them in my work, and I believe a period of time spent doing this would help me to develop the skills necessary to work on projects that involve interviews. In this way, I see myself as staying within qualitative methodological frameworks into the medium term, in which I hope to develop my ability to interview, and to use questions critically. In this way, my positionally would become more fluid on the continuum of insider and outsider - at this stage I may still be researching in educational settings, but perhaps these settings would be ones I am not a member of, and I could continue to develop my understanding of ethical considerations in different settings, such as in Breen (2007). In the long term (which may lie beyond the scope of this masters programme), I would like to be able to formulate effective surveys to gather information beyond the scope of my immediate community, and this would see my work move into a deeper exploration of post-positivist and pragmatic methodologies and designs, developing my ability to work with statistical data. As with the hermeneutic cycle, asking and answering questions begets further questions, and as I agree with the pragmatic paradigm in its principle of the selection of relevant tools to the research question, I would theorise that my ongoing engagement with methodologies, research designs, methods and ethical considerations will be much the same: a life-long process of learning and continual evaluation.

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