

MODULE 2
BMPF7323D

**An Exploration of Approaches to Research with Consideration of
Application to the Workplace of the Voice Practitioner-Researcher**

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Contents

Introduction	3
(1) Paradigms	3
(2) Methodological Approaches	5
(3) Research Designs	6
(4) Research Methods	8
(5) Research Ethics	10
(6) Insider Research	11
Conclusion	12
References	13

Introduction

In this exploration of research approaches, I seek to look at a range of philosophical and procedural devices to understand how they apply to work-based research. As a key current figure on the subject, Creswell (2007) offers that good research needs a paradigm and framework and that the choice of such should be clear in the mind of the researcher and in the text to the reader. Therefore, I will first consider the role, parts, and types of philosophical paradigms before moving on to research methodologies, designs, and methods. Through the literature review, I will select approaches that are relevant to practical application to future research I will undertake in a complex work-based setting as a voice practitioner-researcher.

There is a vast array of literature and terminology to digest and an acknowledged variance in the usage of many terms and their evolving nature (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Morgan, 2012). Despite these challenges, along with learning about some significant overarching approaches and their uses and impact, I expect there to be revelations as to my beliefs and biases on such matters and an opportunity to be informed on challenging topics including ethical considerations. This will lead me to discuss a potential research opportunity in my work context of a private vocal studio principally training adult Popular Music singers.

(1) Paradigms

The Paradigm has been described as a philosophical worldview (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p.17), and as a theoretical framework for research (Mertens, 2020). It is a concept that has been around since the days of philosophers such as Aristotle (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006), yet the work of Kuhn (2012), first published in 1962, is presented as being responsible for both the modern-day popularity of the research paradigm and some of the confusion over its numerous meanings (Morgan, 2007).

Each paradigm contains answers to these areas of questioning: axiology, ontology and epistemology (Creswell, 2007). Firstly, axiology is what we value and what the role of these values are, including our biases as researchers (Creswell, 2007), and ethical behaviour (Brown and Dueñas, 2019; Mertens, 2020), which will be explored later in this paper. Secondly, ontology is the nature of reality (Creswell, 2007; Mertens, 2020). Thirdly, epistemology is the nature of knowledge (Mertens, 2020) and the interaction between the researcher and the knowledge being gained according to Creswell (2007), with what is counted as knowledge being considered by many as a “justified true belief” (Sol and Heng, 2022, p.84). The differing answers that arise to these areas have resulted in many

paradigms and here we will consider the following three that are common and contrasting: postpositivism, constructivism, and pragmatism.

Postpositivism came out of positivism after World War II, retaining much of its association of knowledge having to be observable and quantifiable through a traditional “scientific method” (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006, p. 2) and hypothesis-proving (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006; Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Mertens, 2020) while the researcher remains as separate as possible from the research to guard against bias (Sol and Heng, 2022). A distinguishing difference of postpositivism compared to its positivism predecessor, is the acknowledgement that research can never be fully objective or infallible (Crotty, 1998). The axiological position of postpositivism includes respecting privacy and minimising harm, while holding there is one knowable reality as its ontology, valuing the objectivity of the researcher as of epistemological importance, commonly leading to quantitative or quantitative-dominant mixed methods approaches (Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Morgan, 2007; Mertens, 2020). Critics give attention to its unsuitability for research on human behaviour in the social sciences (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

On the other hand, constructivism works well for human and social sciences as it holds that knowledge is an interpretation of what we observe and experience, therefore, the researcher is present in the research and may produce theories (Sol and Heng, 2022; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). In the constructivist paradigm, the basic axiological position includes fair representation of different viewpoints and positive communal effects, evidencing there are multiple realities as its ontology (Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Morgan, 2007; Mertens, 2020). Also, subjectivity between the participants and the researcher is of epistemological importance, commonly leading to qualitative or qualitative-dominant mixed methods approaches (Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Morgan, 2007; Mertens, 2020). Limitations include a lack of generalisability where sample sizes are small (Sol and Heng, 2022).

The final paradigm to be considered here is pragmatism in which knowledge is subjective and is obtained by any method that addresses the problem or situation in the real world (Sol and Heng, 2022; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). According to Brown and Dueñas (2019) some don't consider it to be a true paradigm; they chose not to include it as it focuses on how to answer the research question rather than placing value on the aforementioned philosophical foundations which others deem pertinent to a prospective choice of paradigm. Still, others do consider it a paradigm where the basic axiological position includes pursuing knowledge to answer the research question in a way that is influenced by the values of the researcher, evidencing there is one reality that individuals interpret differently (Guba and

Lincoln, 2005; Morgan, 2007; Mertens, 2020). Value is placed on choosing any level of researcher objectivity or subjectivity deemed best for the study at hand, commonly leading to a mixed methods approach to accomplish what is needed for the particular study (Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Morgan, 2007; Mertens, 2020).

Many in the field deem the adoption of a paradigm to be central in guiding fitting choices made in the proceeding study (Brown and Dueñas, 2019; Sol and Heng, 2022) and even that making the chosen paradigm clear in the research paper helps the reader understand the research presented (Brown and Dueñas, 2019). However, Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) point out that the role of the paradigm in research is given different weight by different authors and researchers and though seen as central to many, by others the methodology is instead central. At this point, I am inclined towards methodology being more important.

From this area of study, I believe my worldview most comfortably sits in pragmatism due to my epistemological standpoint of openness to the needs of the inquiry at hand in both the relationships between the research, researcher and participant and the methodology deemed most appropriate towards this end.

(2) Methodological Approaches

Influenced by the chosen paradigm, a choice between three methodological approaches is made to carry out research via quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods (Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Morgan, 2007; Mertens, 2020).

Quantitative methodology is the most historically established and is ideal for providing objective, empirical evidence using quantifiable numeric measures and data useful for testing hypotheses, however, it can be complex to carry out (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Lim, 2024b). While it may be criticised for overlooking or oversimplifying human experience, it can be useful to enable generalisations (Lim 2024b), and though there has been a move away from a dependence on quantitative methodology since World War II (Morgan, 2007) there are many who, on a philosophical and political front, fervently hold to only quantitative methodology for providing truth (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). An example of quantitative research in the field of voice pedagogy is the Tan (2017) paper on vocal fold contact quotient in singers where numerical data is presented in charts and tables and described using quantitative data values largely from the acoustical analysis of recorded vocal samples.

Qualitative methodology is newer (Morgan, 2007) and ideal for capturing human and social experiences and the meaning people give to a problem (Creswell, 2007; Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Lim, 2024a). The prevalence of qualitative methodology increased further from the early 1980s (Laverty, 2003; Morgan, 2007) as an answer to the limitations of quantitative methodology in addressing some research questions adequately (Laverty, 2003) as it enables the richness of human perspectives to be recorded but does have limited generalisability (Lim, 2014a). An example of qualitative research in the field of voice pedagogy is the Hughes (2014) paper on vocal artistry where viewpoints from singers and other relevant professionals on the subject are described from interviews including generalisations from the group, quotes from individuals, some differences of opinion, and the presentation of a text-based figure of the identified flow of pedagogical factors.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that mixed methods integrate qualitative and quantitative methodologies within a study leading to findings using numbers and words to gain greater insight than using one alone, and they believe the different methodological approaches are not as separated as they initially seem. Mixed methods is growing in popularity for inquiries in complex human occurrences, particularly relating to health, for reasons such as triangulation and completeness (Doyle, Brady and Byrne, 2016). Yet, as one methodology will primarily be used, a criticism is that it can be challenging to address incongruence and avoid tokenism in the secondary methodology (Doyle, Brady and Byrne, 2016). An example of mixed methods research in the field of voice pedagogy is the Czajkowski, Greasley and Allis (2021) paper on mindfulness for singers using a sequential design with repeated use of a quantitative questionnaire and periods of qualitative data collection through diaries, intervention and interviews, presenting quotes from participants and tables of numerical data. In this case, I believe mixed methods was a good methodology to compare measurable aspects of the impact of the study between participants and of each single participant as well as analysing more individual experiences for overall robustness.

As the focus is on work-based research, I have selected to centre on qualitative study for the remainder of this paper as, even if mixed methods are employed, the emphasis is likely to be on qualitative data (with quantitative playing a supportive role) due to the social nature of the work I do within my vocal studio (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Lim, 2024a). Additionally, I have an interest in exploring the psychology of vocal performers and testing one or more techniques to improve their performance, as exemplified in the qualitative study conducted by Flock (2021).

(3) Research Designs

The point of a research design is to be a pathway to logically addressing the research question (Yin, 2018). Creswell (2007) pairs both grounded theory and phenomenological designs with postpositivism or constructivism, whereas the case study design more often sits under pragmatism in his opinion. However, Yin (2018) proposes a relativist or constructivist worldview to team with the case study. Therefore, considering and comparing these three designs should cover a good amount of ground regarding the philosophical and inquiry possibilities of qualitative methodology.

Phenomenology is about reporting the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon that the participants have in common (Lavery, 2003; Creswell, 2007). There are two main types of phenomenology that many, but not all, make a distinction between: transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology (Lavery, 2003). Husserl (1983), originally published in 1913, is known as the main founder of phenomenology and its development into transcendental phenomenology, with more recent work on the subject by Moustakas (1994) (Lavery, 2003, Creswell, 2007). The combination of hermeneutics and phenomenology to form hermeneutic phenomenology is attributed to Heidegger (1962), originally published in 1927, and more recently van Manen (1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology has an emphasis on interpreting the findings and allowing for researcher interpretation whereas transcendental phenomenology seeks to remove the topical judgements of the researcher from the research (Lavery, 2003, Creswell, 2007). Both phenomenological methods seek to actively include the subjective experiences of the participants in a way that quantitative methods cannot, and the design is carried out through interviews until a clearer, organised picture emerges (Lavery, 2003). A strength of phenomenology is the depth of understanding it can give of common phenomenon, however, it can be challenging to achieve this as it requires careful selection of participants and bracketing of the data (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenon that it can apply to within the field of voice pedagogy is Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) such as in the qualitative study undertaken by Papageorgi and Welch (2020). Their hermeneutic phenomenology design involved interviewing four musicians, the content of which, upon analysis, resulted in four themes being identified and expanded upon using the interview data collected before a discussion relating numerous aspects to existing literature (Papageorgi and Welch, 2020).

Grounded theory research entails gathering the experiences of a group of participants that the data comes from, which becomes the grounds for the theory it produces (Creswell, 2007). It came about from the joint work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), but later there was a division between them in the meaning and means of the design (Creswell, 2007). The design

usually involves interviewing individuals about how they experience the subject before exploring more detailed questions later, all of which inform the coding process of the data (Creswell, 2007). A main challenge of this design is the ability of the researcher to set aside their existing ideas for the theory to truly emerge from the data collected (Creswell, 2007). An example of grounded theory in voice pedagogy research is the Kollwitz (2017) study investigating the effect of a specific type of body and breath work on performance anxiety in acting students. Kollwitz (2007) states it was partaken through a constructivist paradigm and deemed grounded theory appropriate due to the lack of research on the subject to date. As Creswell (2017) notes the applicability of grounded theory in areas where research is lacking (either entirely or for the specific group of interest) I would agree with the choice of design for this study. There were four phases of data collection (survey, interviews, repeated survey, and second interviews) which were triangulated, and themes emerged from the data, drawing some similarity to the design of the aforementioned phenomenological study (Kollwitz, 2007).

Where phenomenology and grounded theory may result in making generalisations from large amounts of data, case study research homes in on one or several cases to give in-depth examples of an issue instead (Creswell, 2007). Yin (2018) explains that the type of case study can be identified from the focus of the question, for example, a “what” question may lead to an exploratory study and a “how” question may lead to an explanatory study. Strengths of case study design include the detailed first-hand observation of events it provides (Yin, 2018) and its applicability in a variety of approaches (Creswell, 2007). However, selecting the best illustrative case can be challenging for the researcher, while selecting multiple can weaken the analysis (Creswell, 2007). An example of this design in voice pedagogy research is the Litawa (2018) single case study looking at the emotional impact of amateur choir singing. Initially, 14 participants took part in a semi-structured interview leading to the participant who best exemplified the answer to the question being selected for the case study, with an in-depth account of that participant’s experience given, including direct quotes (Litawa, 2018).

(4) Research Methods

Creswell and Creswell (2018) consider setting up the means of data collection to include the selection of participants, one or more methods and the protocols for data recording.

Interviews are the most common research method within qualitative methodology (Jamshed, 2014), including for the three designs previously explored (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, this

method will be considered along with observations and audio/visual materials (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Interviews conducted for research between the researcher and a participant can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Dawson, 2009; Jamshed, 2014). Jamshed (2014) suggests most qualitative interviews are semi-structured, which Creswell and Creswell (2018) say involves the use of open-ended questions to garner the view of the participants. Interviews can be useful where direct observation is not possible and can build a fuller history of the occurrence but can be limited due to the filtered views or responses of the participant (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). There are numerous considerations in selecting the best fitting type of interview method with considerations of the recording method, the impact of the researcher's body language and building trust where sensitive information is shared, pointing to the importance of ethics to be considered shortly (Dawson, 2009).

On the other hand, observations provide the researcher first-hand access to the participant in the field (which could be a social context) they are studying which, through copious note taking and discussions, may result in unanticipated details being noticed (Dawson, 2009; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The advantages of observations are that the researcher directly sees what occurs and can record it straight away and it may exemplify experiences that are difficult for the participant to verbalise (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). However, this implies the method is highly dependent on the observation skills of the researcher, which could be a limiting factor (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Similarly, a video recording – as an example of the audio/visual materials method – could also achieve this with the potential advantage to the participant of being less intrusive during the actual event (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The audio/visual materials method could also include photos (Ray and Smith, 2012) or artwork (DiBartolomeo and Clark, 2016), amongst other possibilities, and is considered a good way to enable the inclusion of data that the participant gives value to (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

I can see potential applications to performing singers for these three methods and how they could combine to build a robust qualitative study. For example, video recordings could be made by each singer of a song of their choice in a home practice, at a voice studio lesson and of a live performance to an audience to compare the performance level of the singer in each setting. To support this, interviews with each singer could take place regarding their experience of each of them, with the addition of observations made within the voice studio

setting too. A study through these methods could highlight individual and collective factors that influence the performance level of singers.

Once data is collected there are various approaches and steps to analysing it (Creswell, 2007), including coding which is a way of categorising leading to identifying themes and making descriptions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Subsequently, there is a process of summarising and comparison to existing literature and an interpretation from the researcher (Creswell, 2007). The reliability of the information is validated at all stages of analysis by approaches such as triangulation (Creswell, 2007), where data collected from multiple methods are analysed together to reach a deeper understanding and greater trustworthiness (Carter et al., 2014).

(5) Research Ethics

Ethics should be an ongoing consideration throughout any research project due to the complexities of the relationships and people involved and the changes that can occur (Ramcharan and Cutcliffe, 2001; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Unlike medical research, the ethics of social research is less regulated but has developed since the 1970s, though debates over it continue (Ramcharan and Cutcliffe, 2001), with research most often carried out through a university with an ethics review board to help ensure the rights and wellbeing of the prospective participants and researcher to reduce the risk of harm (Creswell, 2007).

Therefore, ethics includes consideration and communication of the scope of research and the potential impact on all involved which links back to the initial philosophical discussion around axiology, which is about our values and how that impacts our ethical behaviour (Mertens, 2020). Elements such as consent and the right to withdraw should be reiterated without pressure, and trust should be formed and sustained between each participant and the researcher by means such as discussing the findings with the participants to ensure they agree with how their contribution is represented (Ramcharan and Cutcliffe, 2001).

Additionally, out of holding respect for participants, their data, and yourself (the researcher), Dawson (2009) advises to share a Code of Ethics which includes at least the topics of anonymity, confidentiality, right to comment, the final report, and Data Protection. As an example, if the audio/visual method was used, consideration of issues such as consent, accessibility and data protection would be needed (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

All this said, Lindkvist, Koppel and Tinghög (2024) report that even intending to act ethically it is possible we will not, and a level of humility is needed due to researchers tending to overestimate how well they follow “what ought to be” (Brown and Dueñas, 2019, p. 547).

(6) Insider Research

Insider research occurs when a researcher studies an organisation they belong to or a community they share characteristics with (Yin, 2011). However, Bulk and Collins (2024) found the issue of insider research is more complex than this binary definition and consider insider research to have greater value for some research contexts. Braun and Clarke (2013) consider an insider to have an empathetic view whereas an outsider is said to have a critical view.

Frequently, insider research is seen as problematic, despite the benefits relevant expertise can bring (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007) and the potential to be considered more trustworthy (Bulk and Collins, 2024). Two of the challenges are: recognising and dealing with what to do with prior understanding of the subject, and the potential additional emotional impact on the inside researcher (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). However, there are frameworks, such as ethics of care, to address this as an ethical issue (Bulk and Collins, 2024). A third, and common, challenge is the duality of being both researcher and practitioner which can result in a perceived bias and cause confusion and change in the relationships involved (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007).

There is agreement that researchers should be transparent to prospective participants about all that might affect the study, including the role and characteristics (such as gender and ethnicity) of the researcher within it (Yin, 2011; Braun and Clarke, 2013). These details affect not only the view of the researcher, but the view the participant has of the researcher. For example, an insider researcher viewed as an expert could inadvertently influence the participant’s response in an interview as they may feel pressure to respond in a certain way to come across better to the researcher, known as prestige bias (Dawson, 2009).

According to Creswell (2007) and Braun and Clarke (2013), researchers need to exercise reflexivity, a critical reflection of self-awareness, that brings biases, researcher positioning and other potential research-influencing qualities to the consciousness and gives them visibility. In reflectively considering the potential work-based insider research I could do as a singing teacher in a private vocal studio, I am faced with the reality that it will change the relationships I have with any students who choose to become participants which will require

careful navigation for the benevolence outcomes of both parties. One of the ways I could mitigate this challenge is to use Smyth's reflective model (Smyth, 1989) to consciously process and address changes or issues as they arise.

Conclusion

Exploring these wide-ranging aspects of and approaches to research has given me an introductory insight into the challenges and opportunities of work-based research. A work-based research project I am considering is looking to address Music Performance Anxiety (MPA) (Brugués, 2011; Juncos, 2022) in one or more of my students. Due to the psychological nature of this work, it is likely to raise more ethical considerations regarding both parties' mental and emotional wellbeing. I see value in selecting this topic due to the potentially highly positive outcome it could bring to vocal students who are currently inhibited in their performance to some level by MPA. Having experienced some level of MPA myself, I would need to be mindful of my empathetic insider view in how I interview and otherwise go about the study.

Though I would still consider myself a pragmatist, I can see the possibility of this area of research to fit the constructionist paradigm due to its usefulness for social studies and leaning towards qualitative methodology (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Sol and Heng, 2022). I see potential in the hermeneutic phenomenology design (Heidegger, 1962; van Manen, 1990) due to the room given to interpret the findings based on participants' experiences. This could feasibly be carried out through interviews and perhaps video recordings of performances (Dawson, 2009; Creswell and Creswell, 2018) to capture a different perspective while addressing the potential influence or bias I may have by removing my presence as the insider researcher (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). All this would be done with ongoing consideration of transparent communication, shifting relationships and the emotional impact of the study on both parties (Ramcharan and Cutliffe, 2001; Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

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