

Methods, Designs, and Research in Work-Based Settings  
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## **Introduction**

Gathering data from multifaceted work-based settings entails a nuanced understanding of numerous methodological approaches, research designs, and research methods (Fergusson, 2022; Fergusson; van der Laan, Baker, 2019). Insider research, conducted by those working within the singing community, presents unique ethical challenges and opportunities. It is increasingly popular due to the rich contextual insights it can offer. However, it may raise critical questions regarding bias, confidentiality of subjects, and my dual role as researcher and singer (Allen and Varga, 2007; Xiao and Vicente, 2000; Levering, 2006; Kelly, 2012; Dieronitou, 2014;).

The purpose of this evaluation will examine both ontology and epistemology with a subjective focus on their application in the context of the psychology of singing with special focus on behavior and the metaphysical aspects of singing (Allen and Varga, 2007; Dieronitou, 2014; Gehlert and Esswein, 2007; Ramaprasad and Syn, 2013). I aim to critically evaluate my own understanding and concept of personal ontological stance as it pertains to my own potential future research and the potential advantages or disadvantages of insider research as it pertains to vocalists and voice research. Quantitative (Creswell, 2013 ; Dieronitou, 2014; Godwin, et. al., 2021) and qualitative research methodologies (Banks, et. al., 2016; Edelheim, 2014; Godwin, et. al., 2021; Dieronitou, 2014; Costley, Gibbs, & Elliott, 2010), paradigms in research, as well as research methods, design, and ethical implications of insider research will be defined, synthesized and contrasted to reflect my personal ontological and epistemological stances (Novikov & Novikov, 2013; Phan, 2008; Smith, Flowers, & Larkins, 2009). Additionally, I aim to explore how studying the metaphysics of singers within work-based settings might be approached, exploring conceptual frameworks for potentially understanding the deep philosophical implications of my craft.

## **Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology**

Ontology addresses the nature of reality and what there is to know (what is outside of us). In research, this translates to the held beliefs of the researcher and the nature of their reality (Allen and Varga, 2007; Dieronitou, 2014; Gehlert and Esswein, 2007; Ramaprasad and Syn, 2013). As it pertains to ontology, problematically, our values create intents and yearnings which cause changes in our own personal epistemologies being that they govern what we want to accomplish (Allen and Varga, 2007, PG 20) creating a chain reaction in finding or seeking out knowledge necessary for attaining our goals. The spectrum of ontological reality really is quite vast (Dieronitou, 2014).

Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge and how we know what we know (what is inside of us) (Allen and Varga, 2007; Xiao and Vicente, 2000; Levering, 2006; Kelly, 2012; Dieronitou, 2014;) and focuses predominantly on the relationship between an object and subject. Epistemology is unique as it focuses on how I as the researcher develops my own knowledge. Developing my own knowledge can be done so through three main positions: objectivism, subjectivism, and constructivism which will be explored in greater detail in a later section (Novikov & Novikov, 2013; Phan, 2008;). It is through the critical reflection process that a researcher would ascertain their own opinions on what is truth through the examination and collection of concrete data and allowing that data to guide further research. Allen and Varga (2007) point out that in traditional objectivist scientific settings, it is largely believed that there is an objective reality outside of the self and one could study and experiment to paint a more accurate picture of said reality (Rescher, 2003). I find this to be true in science-based settings, however as Kelly (2012) points out, this can be increasingly difficult in constructivist biological

and social systems like semi structured interviews in qualitative research in vocal pedagogy (Banks, et. al., 2016; Edelman, 2014; Godwin, et. al., 2021).

Axiology is the theory of human values as they relate to human behavior such as goal development, aims, and personal opinions which develop via the knowledge that drives our personal actions (Allen and Varga, 2007; Edelman, 2014; Kelly, 2012). With this information, we can begin assessing the vast spectrum of dichotomous standpoints ontology, epistemology, and axiology create in work-based research. More importantly, axiology likely influences a wide range of ethical decisions such as the process of selecting participants or subjects and from where they are chosen, research methodologies, areas or topics of research, and methods of analysis (Howell, 2012; Edelman, 2014).

### **Paradigms**

The positivist perspective posits that there is a single, observable reality. For example, in quantitative studies, surveys that accompany experiments are very common (Xiao and Vicente, 2000). I might put together a survey in my own research examining how vocalists feel about their current mental well-being or anxiety. This approach assumes the role of objectivity and generalizability, meaning it can be used across a wider spectrum of singers and abilities (Gehlert and Esswein, 2007; Ramaprasad and Syn, 2013).

The objectivist approach assumes that the object is reality or what creates meaning regardless of the subject. As a researcher, I would look for methods to test “reality” by gathering evidence as opposed to attempting to interpret social phenomena that makes sense to me, ie evidence-based practice and/or the basis of the scientific method (Hua, 2015; Schrader, 2013; Gehlert and Esswein, 2007; Ramaprasad & Syn, 2013). Seeing is believing for objectivists (Dieronitou, 2014; Godwin, et. al., 2021; Kelly, 2012; Levering, 2006; Phan, 2008; Xiao & Vicente, 2000).

The subjectivist approach assumes that the subject creates the meaning and imposes it on an object, meaning that how we perceive and understand reality at any given time creates our knowledge (Blaikie & Priest, 2017; Denscombe, 2008). The problem with this in my line of research is that it increases the potential for confirmation bias, or in qualitative research, creating leading questions in semi-structured interviews that don't provide a full picture of a thesis (Dieronitou, 2014; Costley, Gibbs, & Elliott, 2010). On the other hand, how I experience the world as an opera singer means that when talking with other vocalists, I have insider experience and knowledge that might allow me to connect in a more meaningful way or ask questions that might be more relevant to the research question.

The constructivist approach is a more balanced version of objectivism and subjectivism, combining elements from both, and is truthfully the more appealing of the basic paradigms within epistemology (Hua, 2015; Blaikie & Priest, 2017). Not only does constructivism reject the notion of there being an objective reality, but it allows for engagement to create meaning with the multiple realities that may exist within the world or within our research worlds.

The interpretivist paradigm emphasizes the criticality of understanding the weight and meaning individuals or groups place on their experiences, positing that reality is socially constructed and entirely subjective (Hallebone & Priest, 2017; Blaikie & Priest, 2017; Hua, 2015). This particular paradigm resonates with me very deeply as a student of metaphysics. In a study I did myself two years ago on how singers view their self-identities, I found that all couldn't separate the idea of “self” from what their professions were as “singers”. Most surrounded

themselves with other singers and musicians, and it was my observation that their lives were so intrinsically tied into their community that they themselves created a sort of tapestry of behaviors within their community that often didn't include outsiders.

Reflexivity is based on the examination of the researcher's own beliefs, assumptions, and careful critical thinking skills (Klay, Zimmermann, & Schneider, 2015). An element of reflexivity is to confront and question who we are as researchers and how we allow that to guide our work (Holland, 1999). This includes how we approach synthesizing information, our views on ethics, and our duty to keep certain types of information confidential.

### **Methodologies**

Simply put, methodology is how research will be conducted (Howell, 2012; Creswell, 2013). The approach is dependent upon and influenced by ontological positioning and epistemological assumptions unique to each researcher. The purpose of quantitative methods is to collect and accurately analyze numerical based data (Creswell, 2013; Dieronitou, 2014; Godwin, et. al., 2021). The purpose of numerical based data is to better illuminate patterns, averages, make predictions based on raw data, to test causal relationships and to be better able to make generalized results to large swaths of populations (Howell, 2012). Some key strengths in qualitative methodologies include hypothesis testing and generalizations as well as better control and manipulation of variables. While that sounds fantastic, one might miss nuances of human behavior, and as a person who studies singers' human experiences (lived experiences), qualitative research could be problematic (Dieronitou, 2014). Another issue might arise in observing patterns in behavior. For example, an experimental study assessing the effectiveness of a new singing technique on singing performance. Quantitative research provides clear descriptive research or overall summary of a study, correlational research, and experimental research where there is a need to observe a cause-and-effect relationship between variables. It is the opposite of qualitative research which doesn't rely on numerical data, rather, it utilizes text, video, or audio.

At its core, qualitative research aims to acquire and analyze non numerical data to gain a better understanding of an individual's world view, reality, and understanding attitudes, beliefs, and motivations (Dieronitou, 2014; Costley, Gibbs, & Elliott, 2010). Qualitative research may be embedded in theoretical, ontological and epistemological frameworks (Gerring, 2017; Lather, 2013). Simply put, qualitative research is entrenched in the human experience, and because of the vastly different the natures of individual experiences results vary based on a number of factors including experience, power, status, and culture (St. Pierre, 2013). Qualitative research designs may include historical study, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and case study (Dieronitou, 2014; Costley, Gibbs, & Elliott, 2010.; Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Suddick, et. al., 2020).

Semi structured interviews allow researchers to speak directly to their subjects and ask meaningful questions (Creswell, 2013; Dieronitou, 2014). Focus groups are also a staple in research of this nature and are another route to gaining responses from participants and making interview observations. Some strengths of qualitative research include rich and detailed data as well as the ability of the researcher to view phenomena in their natural context (Creswell, 2013). However, unlike quantitative data, results may not be easily replicable (Bryman; 2007). Data analysis can be a very time-consuming task as well as being open to subjective interpretation (Gerring, 2017; Bryman, 2007). For human experience-based research for singers, qualitative studies work very well for me because it allows observation of subjects' experiences in an intimate way that is wholly described from the point of view of the singer. It is the hope that after

several interviews with an appropriate number of singers that I would be able to identify themes in the phenomena under tedious study.

Phenomenology and Hermeneutics, though habitually used interchangeably, demonstrate distinct methodological distinctions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkins, 2009). Phenomenology is grounded in the works of Husserl and aims to unravel both the subjective complexities and the self-ascribed meanings inherent in individual experiences of phenomena (Dieronitou, 2014; Costley, Gibbs, & Elliott, 2010.; Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Suddick, et. al., 2020). Phenomenological researchers studying singers and the human experiences behind it are required to “bracket out” their own personal experiences, stances, and values (Smith, et. al., 2009; Van Manen, 2016)), examining phenomena independently of preexisting theories and/or biases. Reflecting judiciously on this viewpoint, I find this method both intriguing and challenging. My own axiological obligation to singing and the study of individual experiences directly conflicts with the demand for neutrality, however, I would be interested in reading or participating in studies carried out by non-singers on potential singer issues.

Hermeneutics aids in the complex processes of understanding and analyzing experience (Finlay, 2012). It aims to focus on language, inter-communication and texts as the mediums through which reality may be understood. It is an appealing approach as it relies on the belief that all knowledge is shaped by an individual’s history, background, and environment (Suddick, et. al., 2020). In Hermeneutic inquiry, researchers are strongly encouraged to participate in self-reflection as part of the interpretive process as their own experiences, values, biases and are considered to be crucial in the interpretation process (Finlay, 2012; Sloan & Bower, 2014; Suddick, et. al., 2020). This approach resonates deeply within my own practice and supports with my ontological leanings toward interpretivism, supporting a robust axiological foundation and promoting an ethical underpinning through reflexivity.

Case studies can sometimes be overlooked as merely a way to collect data but are in fact a comprehensive methodology of their own (Stake, 1995). Case studies may focus on groups, communities, individuals, and with the intent of focusing on individualistic examination within the subject of study or at postulating a holistic portrayal subject to comprehensive analysis (Yin, 2018). They can be intrinsic, instrumental, or collective depending on the research goals (Stake, 1995). Case studies allow researchers to investigate complex phenomena within real-life environments, making it particularly valuable for acquiring nuanced understanding and practical insights. In work-based research, case studies can be valuable because they offer detailed, contextual insights that can directly inform practice and policies within particular specialized environments (Bassey, 1999; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). For example, a case study might be useful in investigating the implementation of a new program in a classroom, the impact of leadership styles in educational settings, or the effectiveness of work life balance interventions among professional singers.

Some glaringly helpful aspects of case studies are their ability to provide in depth and comprehensive understanding of subject matter while capturing both complexities and subtleties of real-life experiences, contextual insights, flexibility, and practical relevance Gray, 2018; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). However, as Gray (2018) and Stake (1995) point out, case studies aren’t particularly generalizable to other populations or contexts, can be very time consuming, are analytically complex, and because of the nature of changing perspectives and philosophical assumptions, are very subjective.

Mixed methods design is an approach that utilizes certain elements of qualitative and quantitative methods within a single study in an effort to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem or question (Creswell, 2013). Mixed methods lends itself especially well to the study of complex phenomena as it allows both the depth of qualitative data as well as the generalizability of quantitative data (Creswell Plano Clark, 2018). It can also lend itself well to cross verification of results which may reinforce the validity of findings (Denscombe, 2008). In my own research, I find mixed methods design very demanding in that you have to have a firm grasp on both qualitative and quantitative methods, and the integration of the two pose a real challenge when studying more abstract topics like metaphysics (Bryman, 2007; Creswell, 2013).

### **Insider Research and Ethics**

In all types of research, ethical considerations hold utmost importance across all fields. Insider research may present both uniquely complicated and multifaceted ethical challenges that demand painstaking attention. There has been a remarkable shift in focus from exclusively academic research toward work-based research and knowledge cultivation and generation. This change suggests broader global influences in education and educational policies. Research conducted in my own professional environment entails the navigation of several ethical complexities and concerns such as the risk of bias, obtaining consent, power dynamics or role conflicts, confidentiality, and maintaining an element of objectivity where possible.

Insider research raises important questions for me about bias, confidentiality, and my own dual role as a professional opera singer with insider knowledge and voice researcher. Some pros and cons of insider research should be synthesized. One of the most important advantages of insider research is my own understanding of the organizational context (Brannick & Coughlan, 2007; Costley, Gibbs, Elliott, 2010). It is the hope that this familiarity leads to more nuanced and cognizant research questions, vibrant data analyzation, and the ability to catch insights that may otherwise elude someone outside of the field of singing. It is the very act of having the deep contextual knowledge that allows for a more authentic and comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being examined and the leveragability of my existing relationships and trust within the singing community that allows me to gain access to knowledge and data that could otherwise be isolated or unavailable. Alternatively, this level of intimate knowledge may create bias, or selective attention, where the emphasis on data gathered confirms a pre-existing belief or viewpoint (Saidin, 2016).

As an inside researcher, one often has access to both data and insights that researchers outside of the field can't easily obtain. For instance, an outside researcher may not recognize the unique stressors that singers go through to learn new operatic or musical theater roles, how it feels to have an instrument that is inside the body, or the mental toll that a cutthroat singing industry has on the body. Because of this insider knowledge, researchers may provide a larger more robust depiction of findings which augments the validity of the research itself. Moreover, insider researchers may be able to enable the collection of longitudinal data that other researchers cannot, tracking variations and developments over time (Brannick & Coughlan, 2007; Costley, Gibbs, Elliott, 2010). With access to sensitive data, I have identified an ethical predicament surrounding confidentiality and role conflict (Saidin, 2016). Saidin (2016) observes that not only are there debates on whether insider researchers can remain objective, but insider researchers sometimes overlook the confidentiality of their subjects and reveal too much sensitive information. Additionally, there may be certain issues that arise within the research analysis that are overlooked as unimportant to insiders but would be critical pieces of

information for outsiders. I think as an insider researcher who has already done studies on musicians, I struggle with divulging too little or providing too little context for an outside reader, and as Saidin (2016) pointed out, my style of research makes it difficult to remain wholly objective.

Building trust and report are critical to any study (Banks, et. al., 2016). It is possible that as an insider researcher that participants in studies may feel more comfortable and open interacting with me as opposed to an outsider, which in turn could lead to more open and honest communication. In a qualitative study where interviews are being conducted this could be an excellent way to ensure more vibrant data (Costley, Gibbs, & Elliott, 2010). However, this also means maintaining objectivity to an extent, which is difficult when one is a participant in the culture and share similar personal experiences. Not remaining objective enough can skew perception of data leading to confirmation bias. Reflexivity is critical and being vigilant in self-reflection seems incredibly important in not allowing assumptions blur what is reality (Holland, 1998; Klay, Zimmermann, & Schneider, 2015).

As someone who delves in the metaphysical dimensions of singing I would consider it as more than just a technical skill; it is an expression of the true self, a raw embodiment of emotions, and a culmination of cultural and/or spiritual values (Baroncelli, 2015). While I have no associations with a professional organization or institution at this time, my research is still considered insider research. It is driven by my personal and intrapersonal relationships with singers; professionally, as a colleague, and intimately. Maintaining both transparency and ethical behavior, it would be critical for me to articulate any positionality I may hold as well as posture future research within an extensive literature review. My role as an insider researcher directly relates to communities and disciplines within such as opera singers and the field of metaphysics and psychology. The duty of care in which a study must be conducted should lean heavily into ethical responsibility, thereby protecting the anonymity and well-being of any participants. My research specifically involves deep and sometimes uncomfortable “why” questions. Collaboration with singers actively working in our community juxtaposed against psychological sciences helps temper reflexivity in a way that allows for balance in my analysis. The aim in this type of study is to figure out why singers are the way we are and in no way am I prepared to establish any course of action in our educational practices as educators just yet. It is my hope that eventually I will be able to partner with policy makers at the collegiate level to give singers a well rounded set of tools to better understand themselves and the boundaries necessary to protect their love for the craft.

### **Conclusion**

This exploration into ontology, epistemology, and axiology, including their implications for research methodologies, ethical considerations, and paradigms, emphasizes the complexity and nuanced nature of insider research within the singing community. Not only is there a relationship between values, knowledge and methodological choices, but there is a finer balance to be struck between objectivity and subjectivity in qualitative and quantitative research. The challenge of studying metaphysical issues in singers presents unique opportunities for deep and complex insights into issues within our singing community but also presents ethical challenges. Balancing the role of singer and researcher highlights a need for sensitivity and extra care in the level of reflexivity and ethical vigilance necessary to gain rich insights. Ultimately, my pursuit of gaining a deeper understanding of the metaphysical dimensions of singing-going beyond technical skill and crossing into emotional, cultural and spiritual expressions and experiences-adds a layer of complexity to my desire for research. Careful consideration for methods will be necessary in my next research venture to capture the breadth of this multifaceted phenomena.

This research will aim to contribute not only to my own understanding, academic understanding of vocalists' experiences, but also to other practical applications that could enhance the education experiences of young singers and professional practitioners within the singing community.

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