

Name: Winnie Tang
Student number: 2318827
Cohort M
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Introduction

As a vocalist and singing coach who teaches privately and at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, I am profoundly interested in understanding how performance students learn and apply their knowledge in their performances. Being a complete novice in research, particularly work-based research, I aim to gain valuable insights through this assignment, which will inform how I conduct my upcoming research.

This essay will explore various philosophical backgrounds, paradigms, research designs, and methodologies, focusing on ethics and insider research. By examining these foundational elements comprehensively, I plan to understand the research landscape. Without a specific research question or topic currently in mind, my goal is to familiarise myself with the diverse facets of research. This exploration will help me identify an area that resonates with my interests and professional aspirations, ultimately guiding me toward a meaningful and well-structured research project.

Philosophical Background in Research

Burnard (2006, pp. 144-5) states that "the researcher's beliefs, theories, or assumptions influence every step in the process of research." Williamon (2021) emphasises the importance of establishing researchers' ontological and epistemological views before conducting research. This practice ensures accurate answers to research questions, provides a rationale for generating new knowledge, and helps identify inherent assumptions and biases. Cohen (2018) adds that differing ontologies, epistemologies, and models of human nature lead to distinct research methods, directly impacting methodological considerations.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) explained that all essential ways to uncover truth through research rely on three underlying elements. They are:

Ontology - what is the nature of reality, and what can be known about it?

Epistemology - what is the relationship between the knower and what can be known?

Methodology - how can the inquirer discover what they believe can be known?

They correspond to three of the four sets of assumptions that underpin research set forth by Burrell and Morgan (1979): ontological, epistemological, human nature (model of human will; determinism vs. voluntarism), and methodological assumptions.

"Ontology can be thought of as the philosophical study into the nature of being or, in other words, what is real" (Williamon, 2021, p. 15). It is a study or science of being to

understand the nature of existence and the fundamental structure of reality (Crotty, 2020). Burrell and Morgan (1979) identified ontological assumptions about the fundamental nature or essence of the social phenomena under investigation (Cohen, 2017). Reality can be categorised as either objective, existing independently of human thoughts and behaviours, or subjective, existing solely within human thoughts and behaviours (Williamon, 2021). For instance, the perception or cognition of a dog is not exclusively subjective but based on the dog's independent existence (Cohen, 2018).

Epistemology explores the nature of knowledge, including its possibility, scope, and foundations (Hamlyn, 1995, cited by Crotty, 2020). Epistemology thrives on establishing a philosophical grounding for determining the possible types of knowledge and how to ensure their adequacy and legitimacy (Crotty, 2020). According to Burrell and Morgan (1979), epistemological assumptions address the foundations of knowledge, encompassing its nature, forms, acquisition, and communication with others. One's position in this debate significantly influences the approach to uncovering knowledge about social behaviour (Cohen, 2018). For example, a positivist would be someone who sees knowledge as objective, tangible, and rooted in empirical evidence. On the other hand, an anti-positivist or post-positivist views knowledge as personal, subjective, and unique to individuals (Cohen, 2018).

In addition to ontology and epistemology, axiology encompasses our values and beliefs. This perspective shifts our focus from perceiving research methods as purely technical to being concerned with comprehending the world. Our worldview, conception of understanding, purpose, and what we deem valuable influence this perspective (Cohen, 2018).

Paradigms

A paradigm guides the use of research tools and devices during the planning stage and serves as a philosophical framework shaping the theories and practices of a research project (Wilkinson & Dokter, 2023; Creswell, 2023). Cohen (2018) describes paradigms as a common worldview, defining the characteristics of a research group, dictating how knowledge is acquired, setting research priorities and methods, and providing standard solutions. Williamon (2021) identifies three paradigms commonly used in music performance research: post-positivism, constructionism, and pragmatism.

Post-positivism, which evolved from positivism, acknowledges the existence of an objective truth that is measurable and describable but recognises that our understanding of it is

inherently flawed due to subjective perceptions and cognitive limitations. These limitations introduce biases in our observations and understanding (Williamon, 2021). It questions the notion of absolute truth in knowledge (Phillips & Burbules, 2000) and views knowledge generation as a top-down process. Post-positivist research methods aim to capture objective truth as accurately as possible while minimising the researcher's influence. This approach involves formulating hypotheses that predict expected observations if the theory is valid and contrasting predictions for what would be observed if the theory is false (Williamon, 2021; Creswell, 2023).

Constructionism, according to Williamon (2021), posits that reality is a social construct shaped by human interactions and interpretations rather than an independent entity. Our shared understanding of the world arises from the diverse subjective experiences of individuals across different times and cultures, forming the basis of our perceived social reality. Pring (2015) adds that in social constructionism, researchers are part of the world they study, and meanings evolve through negotiation among participants, including the researcher. This leads to multiple realities, with truth determined by consensus rather than objective tests, making the study context-dependent. Although constructionism acknowledges subjective experiences, it suggests these should contribute to a socially objective understanding of reality (Williamon, 2021). This approach encourages exploring the complexity of the context rather than simplifying concepts (Creswell, 2023).

Pragmatism is not tied to any specific philosophy or view of reality. This perspective applies to mixed methods research, as researchers freely draw from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions in their investigations (Creswell, 2023; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). It focuses on practical solutions and effectiveness. (Patton, 1990). It supports and endorses novel and progressive research methods. Thus, pragmatism enables researchers to select the most effective methods, or a combination thereof, to answer their research questions (Onwuegbuzie and Johnson, 2006).

Research design

A research design is a structured plan for conducting research that effectively enables researchers to address their research questions “based on evidence and warrants” (Cohen, 2018, p. 173). It involves strategically organising the various components of the research

process to ensure the study is feasible and the findings are well-supported (Cohen, 2018; Labaree, 2013).

Before we begin our research, we must consider our resources, such as availability and time constraints, funding/money, and other tools or instruments needed for the research (Robson, 2017). As well as ethical considerations and subjects' accessibility (Wilkinson & Dokter, 2023). Research design involves selecting a meaningful and feasible research project topic, strategising methods and resources, conducting a literature review to incorporate existing knowledge, and considering the project's practicality, validity, and ethical considerations. Sampling is also a significant factor in research. All these will affect the warranty of the research and how data will be interpreted (Cohen, 2018).

The research design encompasses all the strategies and steps undertaken by the researcher, involving a sequence of decisions throughout the process (Williamon, 2021). Figure 1 below gives us an overview of the research design process.

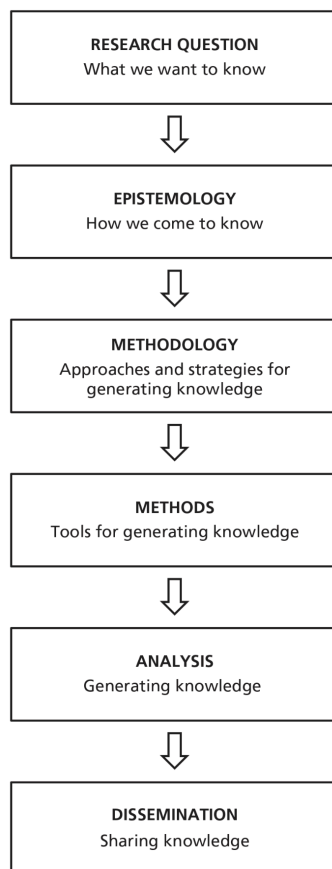


Figure 1: Research design (adapted from Williamon, 2021, p. 23)

Research methodologies and methods

Research methodologies envelop the entire research process, from overarching assumptions to specific methods of interpretation, data collection, and analysis (Creswell, 2023). There are three commonly used methodologies for research: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Creswell, 2023; Williamon, 2021). Researchers should not see qualitative and quantitative approaches as inflexible or opposing categories. Instead, they represent different points on a spectrum. (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Newman & Benz, 1998, cited by Creswell, 2023, p. 4). We will explore qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, focusing more on the qualitative approach as it potentially aligns more closely with my research interest.

Qualitative approach

Qualitative research explores how people interpret social or human issues (Creswell, 2023) with a “focus on *understanding* the social world” (Williamon, 2021, p. 31). It employs an inductive approach, a bottom-up manner rooted in data (Williamon, 2021), to obtain data from the participants themselves. The qualitative approach analyses and interprets the significance of the data, with an emphasis on the individuality and intricacy of each scenario (Creswell, 2023). Hammersley (2013) describes qualitative research as utilising less structured data than quantitative research, focusing on the principle of subjectivity in the research process and examining a few cases in depth using verbal analysis instead of statistical methods. Williamon (2021) noted that while the qualitative approach can fully document settings and contexts, it also permits researcher biases. Other limitations include the difficulty with generalising findings and the potential for data to be overly complex or disorganised.

According to Williamon (2021), the qualitative approach has been gaining popularity among music researchers. Holmes and Holmes (2013) suggested the subjective nature of music performers might be the reason the qualitative approach is favoured. Qualitative approaches are suitable for understanding experiences and/or processes that are difficult or impossible to quantify, allowing researchers to utilise contextual knowledge to comprehend the nuances in music learning, teaching, performing and listening experiences (Williamon, 2021). However, we should also be concerned about the validity of qualitative research because it attempts to generate meanings from subjective materials; therefore, it is very important to ensure its credibility (Lee, 2022).

Figure 2 below lists the main advantages and limitations of qualitative approaches:

Table 2.1 Main advantages and limitations of qualitative approaches

Advantages	Limitations
◆ Capture details of settings and contexts holistically	◆ Open to (unhelpful) researcher bias
◆ Explore unknown phenomena	◆ Findings unlikely to be generalizable
◆ Privilege individual and/or lived experiences	◆ Data can be overly “messy” or convoluted

Figure 2: Main advantages and limitations of qualitative approaches (adapted from Williamon, 2021, p. 38)

We will explore four strategies for qualitative methodology suggested by Williamon (2021): “ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and qualitative case study” (Williamon, 2021, p.32).

Ethnography emerged from anthropology and sociology. It is linked to cultural studies and aims to detail the cultural practices of specific groups over a considerable time (Creswell, 2023; Williamon, 2021). Research methods for data collection usually include observations and interviews (Wolcott, 1994). Ethnography is ideal for understanding musical cultures in educational institutions and orchestras or for exploring daily interactions among musicians (Williamon, 2021) because by immersing themselves in participants' environments (Hammersley, 1985), researchers gain opportunities to observe and interview participants closely, learning intricate details of their daily lives and operations (Jeffrey and Truman, 2004).

Phenomenology, originating from philosophy and psychology, describes individuals' lived experiences of a phenomenon. It aims to distil the common essence among participants and generally involves interviews (Creswell, 2023). Phenomenology seeks to record participants' experiences directly; hence, researchers have to remain impartial when interpreting the structure and importance of the experience from the participant's viewpoint, focusing on how the participants make sense of their reality.

(Williamon, 2021). However, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) has emerged due to the inevitability of researchers taking an active role in the data collection and analysis process. IPA is a two-stage interpretative process where participants try to make meaning of their reality during data collection while researchers attempt to interpret and understand the meaning-making process of the participants during analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Phenomenology can be ideal for exploring in-depth experiences and meaning-making processes of music-related communities, such as performers, audiences, teachers, examiners, and patients (Williamon, 2021), as demonstrated in Nicol's (2010) study, where Nicol employed a phenomenological approach to explore "music listening experiences of women with chronic illnesses" (Williamon, 2021, p.35). Through collecting data via in-depth interviews and interpreting them to encapsulate the lived experiences of these women and their experiences with illness and music, Nicol was able to create a comprehensive report of how these women are experiencing through music listening, such as: "companionship and a sense of routine, was experienced through the body, allowed for immersion, facilitated wholeness, and offered a means of "reprieve" when needed" (Williamon, 2021, p.35). This allows "readers to grasp more perceptively the lived meaning of music listening in the context of chronic illness" (Nicol 2010, p. 362).

Grounded theory is a great strategic option for developing "a new theoretical understanding of a topic through systematic qualitative analysis" (Williamon, 2021, p. 36) because of its inductive approach rooted in the data and multiple stages of data collection, constant refinement and comparison until saturation has been reached. It is a time-consuming approach due to the constant distillation of information until no further discoveries are revealed before arriving at a theory (Williamon, 2021; Creswell, 2023). However, such detailed distillation of information can be time-consuming and may require extra resources (Williamon, 2021). It may not be ideal for work-based research with limited time and resources. Smilde (2009) conducted a study on the lifelong learning experiences of musicians using grounded theory. She conducted thirty-two biographical interviews with professional musicians. She analysed the data in three stages: concept-driven coding, deriving from literature, data and personal ideas; axial coding to explore code relationships; and selective coding to group themes into a framework. This framework emphasised musicians' artistic, general, and educational leadership, varied learning styles, and the necessity for adaptive learning environments within reflective institutional cultures (Smilde, 2009). Using grounded theory, Smilde was able to develop a new

understanding of how musicians learn throughout their lives, reflecting on the education of professional musicians in the twenty-first century (Williamon, 2021).

Qualitative case studies involve meticulous investigation “of a particular person, group, place, or topic through an illustrative example” (Williamon, 2021, p.36). Qualitative case studies may adopt various data collection procedures, such as ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory, to gain an optimal understanding of the subject. Quantitative methodologies might sometimes be called for as a mixed-method approach in case studies (Williamon, 2021). Case studies are typically conducted in real-world settings, where researchers use multiple methods to achieve the most comprehensive understanding possible (Stake, 2000). This combination of strategies enables researchers to concentrate on a specific case while using a particular approach to gain a deeper understanding. However, researchers should be cautious not to generalise based on a single case (Williamon, 2021).

Quantitative approach

According to Hammersley (2013), the quantitative approach focuses on hypothesis testing, numerical data, maintaining procedural objectivity, generalising findings, identifying systematic patterns of association, and isolating and controlling variables. Researchers utilising quantitative methods present their procedures in a way that enables others to replicate the study with different participant samples, thereby validating or challenging the original results (Williamon, 2021).

Quantitative research emphasises objectivity and aims to collect accurate data to measure or test phenomena without bias. It identifies patterns and trends through numerical data, typically analysed with statistical tests. The goal is to generalise findings to a wider population using large, representative samples. This research follows a predetermined design, with detailed data collection and analysis planning to ensure replicability. Researchers use a top-down approach, relying on pre-existing theories and hypotheses (Williamon, 2021). Some potential risks to reliability in quantitative approaches include participants misunderstanding instructions or questions and participant bias—whether deliberate or unintentional. For example, music students might exaggerate practice hours due to peer pressure. Researchers might also choose inappropriate measurement tools or make errors during data processing and analysis (Williamon, 2021).

Experimental research aims to identify whether a specific treatment affects a result. Treatment is administered to one group but withheld from the other group. The researcher can then compare and evaluate the results from both groups. Experiments may involve true experiments with random assignments or quasi-experiments with non-randomized assignments (Keppel, 1991). "Single-subject designs in which a single individual or group is observed over a period of time and interventions administered and then withheld" (Gast & Ledford, 2014, cited by Creswell, 2023, p.13). An experimental study aims to test the hypotheses set by the researchers and is conducted in artificial settings created by the researchers (Lee, 2022). Campbell and Stanley (1963, 1969) noted that even experimental research designs have flaws, but they might be the only way to comprehend the process in some cases. The improvement in statistical methods since the 1970s has improved the reliability and validity of such research designs via replication and cross-validation (Lee, 2022).

Nonexperimental research (survey research) quantitatively describes a population's patterns, mindsets, or standpoints by analysing a sample. It employs questionnaires or structured interviews to collect data in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, intending to generalise the results to a population (Fowler, 2008).

Mixed methods involve gathering and integrating quantitative and qualitative data to derive knowledge or conclusions. Qualitative data is typically open-ended and lacks predefined answers, while quantitative data generally comprises closed-ended responses (Creswell, 2023). Although both approaches are often combined in research, one usually dominates the other. Differentiation between them can sometimes be delusive as quantitative methods like surveys could yield qualitative data if open-ended questions were employed. Conversely, it is also possible to quantify qualitative results (Brannen, 1995). Mixed methods enable researchers to gain multiple insights into a single phenomenon and are useful when a single approach cannot fully address the research question (Williamon, 2021). One example is Allen's (2011) study on piano students' performance anxiety and free improvisation, which uses quantitative analysis (standardised questionnaires) and qualitative analysis (interviews and observations) (Williamon, 2021).

Ethics and Insider Research

Ethical considerations in research are precepts that provide a clear structure and a moral framework for research designs and practices. In academia and public sector research, well-defined rules of conduct and guidelines detail how research projects should be conducted and how data should be managed and analysed (Wilkinson and Dokter, 2023). The researcher or research team's ethical consideration will be part of this research protocol, which outlines the documentation process for a study, detailing how and where data will be collected, how it will be analysed, and the scope and objectives of the investigation (Brooks, Te Riele, and Maguire, 2014).

Farrimond (2012) stated that if the aim of research is to expand knowledge, insights, and/or yield impact, transparency and impartiality are paramount. Otherwise, the results, validity, and value would be questioned. Therefore, research ethics are crucial because they ensure that research is recognised and accredited by sponsors, peers, and society. Without transparent and vigorous ethical guidelines, the credibility of research would be compromised (Wilkinson and Dokter, 2023).

Lee (2022, p.147) cited Fisher and Anunshko (2008), who stated that “major specific concerns in research ethics are conflict of interest, informed consent, and justice in social research”. Alongside “voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, the potential for harm, accurate reporting” (Wilkinson and Dokter, 2023, p.15) are key considerations of ethics in research. Wilkinson and Dokter (2023) emphasised the importance of treating participants fairly and within reason, protecting the human rights and dignity of participants.

Informed consent and voluntary participation

Acquiring consent from participants is of utmost importance in research. Ensuring that participants are treated fairly and with full information is essential. Participants should be informed about the study's objectives and merits and aware of any risks involved (Wilkinson and Dokter, 2023; Lee, 2022). Participants should not be forced but should join voluntarily. They must be informed that they can choose to participate or withdraw at any time. Voluntary participation will likely yield genuine and believable data (Wilkinson and Dokter, 2023).

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Protecting participants' identities is crucial in research. Most protocols provide clear processes for handling participant information anonymously. However, in some cases,

participants' identities are collected to ensure the data are collected from the correct participants' profiles. The information is typically anonymised and extracted before documentation and interpretation. Researchers must clearly explain how such information will be handled to ensure confidentiality (Wilkinson and Dokter, 2023).

Potential for harm

Although most social science research does not expose participants to physical, social, or psychological harm, discussing controversial topics may cause distress. Researchers should clearly outline their strategies to limit or prevent this harm (Wilkinson and Dokter, 2023). Additionally, researchers must ensure their own well-being, considering the unpredictable nature of fieldwork and the need for emotional and professional safety (Mayan, 2023).

Accurate reporting

Professional research should be original (researchers' own work), and the work of others should be properly credited to avoid plagiarism (Crewswell, 2023). It should accurately present data, clearly detailing the types of data collected and the analytical methods used (Wilkinson and Dokter, 2023).

Justice in Research

Justice in social research specifically addresses race, ethnicity, and culture issues (Lee, 2022). Fisher and Anushko (2008) argue that social injustice arises when segments of the population are knowingly or unknowingly excluded or inadequately defined without considering all social dynamics and when measurement tools are unsuitable for all demographics included in the research project.

Insider Research

Insider research involves a researcher studying a familiar topic, such as their own culture or ethnic background (Hockey, 1993, cited by Saidin, 2016). On the contrary, outsider research is where researchers are not part of the subject, interest or environment they study (Mercer, 2007).

Insiders often cite advantages such as convenience of access, the ability to develop trust, and shared understanding and language (Mayan, 2023). Oakley (1981) stated that researchers sharing the same gender or shared values and experiences build better rapport and conduct more efficient interviews. Opposingly, Kanuha (2000) argues that the researchers' own

ruminations on the possibly sensitive nature of the data might hinder their attention during the interview process. Additionally, attempting to extract information that participants know the researcher already has can sometimes irritate them (DeLyer, 2001). Furthermore, the research's neutrality and potential prejudice have also been debated because of the similar backgrounds of researchers and participants (Saidin, 2016).

Mayan (2023) and Crewswell (2023) highlighted the issue of researchers' power, emphasising that researchers should be mindful of how they assert power over participants. Mayan (2023) also noted that power dynamics in the research setting can be changeable. And that no researcher can be purely either an insider or an outsider. Instead, this role exists on a continuum and evolves throughout the research. Such power dynamics might happen in voice-related work-based research, for example, if a student felt coerced to join the study by their teachers.

Conclusion

Completing this assignment has been a significant journey, offering a broad yet insightful exploration of the research world. By examining various philosophical backgrounds, paradigms, research designs, and methodologies, as well as delving into the ethics and intricacies of insider research, I have gained a foundational understanding of how to plan and conduct my own research in the future. Although I have only scratched the surface of this vast field, this assignment has provided me with a basic overview of the essential components of research. It has prompted me to reflect on my own philosophical perspectives and consider how different paradigms align with my personality and the type of research I wish to undertake.

I see myself as inherently subjective, likely influenced by my background as a performer and musician. However, I also embrace a form of objectivity, recognising that reality is shaped by the diverse perspectives of different individuals and their unique experiences. For example, Williamon (2021) describes how a music researcher might use a constructionist approach to explore singers' experiences preparing for a masterclass. The researcher would select a small, diverse group of singers to study extensively, aiming to understand each singer's perspective, past experiences, and expectations of the masterclass setting. Knowledge would emerge organically from the data using a bottom-up approach, with the researcher interpreting the data to accurately represent the singers' social reality rather than testing a pre-existing theory. I am particularly drawn to the inductive approach to acquiring knowledge, as it seems less

susceptible to personal biases. This subjective yet objective approach aligns closely with the paradigms of constructionism, which resonate with my personal perspective and approach to obtaining knowledge. Recognising this alignment drives me to think critically about the philosophical underpinnings guiding my research endeavours.

Another significant area that is new to me is ethics and insider research. These concepts have profoundly transformed my understanding of research work. Ethics in research underscores the importance of morality and responsibility in all stages of the investigative process (Wilkinson, 2023). Meanwhile, insider research, where the researcher is part of the community being studied (Saidin, 2016), offers unique insights and challenges. Engaging with these topics has opened my eyes to the nuanced considerations necessary for conducting meaningful and responsible research.

This newfound awareness helps me appreciate the importance of selecting appropriate methodologies and maintaining ethical standards throughout the research process. As I move forward, this foundational knowledge will be invaluable in shaping my approach to research and ensuring that my work is rigorous and meaningful.

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