

**What must practitioner researchers consider
when conducting ethical and impactful
work-based research in voice pedagogy?**

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What must practitioner researchers consider when conducting ethical and impactful work-based research in voice pedagogy?

Introduction

As I begin my journey into work-based research and designing my first research project, it is important to consider the way I engage with research paradigms, methodologies, and ethical considerations so that my findings are rigorous, relevant, and ethically sound (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). As a practitioner-researcher, I am a vocal coach and postgraduate researcher. When considering this duality, it asks a deep understanding of pedagogical practices and a reflexive and critical approach to research design. My research interests include neuroinclusivity and gender-affirming vocal pedagogy, and I am more specifically interested in understanding how vocal training can be designed to support transgender and neurodivergent singers better. As the voice and voice pedagogy can at many times be subjective and context-specific, such as in the case of gender-affirming voice care and taking into account the vocal identity and voice training objectives of the individual (Palkki & Caldwell, 2018), it is essential to critically and systematically consider various research paradigms, methodologies, and methods to make sure that new practitioner research can add meaningfully to the conversation of pedagogical practice (Crotty, 1998).

In this assignment, I will critically evaluate the philosophical and methodological considerations that are the foundation of work-based research in vocal pedagogy, beginning with exploring a range of research paradigms and how they impact methodological choices. I will then evaluate qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods methodologies. Qualitative research explores subjective experiences through methods such as interviews and thematic analysis to ascertain meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In contrast, quantitative research focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Mixed methods combine the depth of qualitative research with quantitative rigour to present a fuller picture (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Given the nature of my areas of interest, which focus on the lived experiences of neurodivergent singers and transgender voice users going through transition, I will focus more on qualitative methods.

The final section addresses important ethical considerations, particularly those related to insider research, power dynamics, and participant welfare, and what this means for the integrity and validity of research in voice pedagogy.

This assignment aims to establish a methodologically rigorous and ethically responsible approach to my work-based research. By applying the principles explored, I want to ensure that my research is academically robust and directly applicable to my practice and wider pedagogical practices in voice.

Research Paradigms

Research paradigms are the frameworks that shape how research is designed and conducted (Crotty, 1998). They, in turn, are shaped by philosophical ideas about ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (how knowledge is constructed), and axiology (the role of values in research) (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). These philosophical stances can influence the selection of methodological approaches and methods that align with the research question and context (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). For example, a positivist paradigm assumes reality is objective and values empirical evidence, typically leading the researcher to choose quantitative methods such as surveys and statistical analysis (Bryman, 2016). Contrary to this, an interpretivist paradigm assumes multiple subjective realities would align more closely with qualitative methods such as interviews, which offer the opportunity to explore individual experiences more deeply. Building on this, paradigms such as positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory offer distinct but complementary insights into the nature of work-based research in vocal pedagogy (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Positivism

Positivism assumes that reality is objective and exists independently of human perception (Bryman, 2016). Based in this realist ontology and an empiricist epistemology (the belief that knowledge is created through sensory experience and observable phenomena), it aims to create generalisable knowledge through systematic, measurable methods (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). For example, a positivist approach in vocal pedagogy could include quantitative studies measuring the acoustic properties of the voice, as these provide valuable empirical data on vocal function and technique (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For instance, Titze and Sundberg (1997) conducted a study analysing vocal fold dynamics using acoustic and physiological

measurements, which showed how empirical research can quantify vocal function within a positivist framework. Such studies provide objective data that can inform evidence-based pedagogical practices.

However, positivism has significant limitations within vocal pedagogy research. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) discuss, its emphasis on objectivity and numerical data diminishes or excludes the subjective experiences of voice users, which are necessary for understanding the emotional, psychological, and contextual aspects of voice use. For instance, the lived experience of a transwoman singer undergoing vocal feminisation training cannot be captured through quantitative acoustic analysis alone. So, while positivism helps investigate the physiological aspects of the voice, it also appears to need complementary paradigms to address the broader complexities of vocal pedagogy (Titze and Verdolini Abbott, 2012).

Interpretivism

Interpretivism offers an alternative view to positivism by suggesting that reality is subjective and socially constructed. Its relativist ontology suggests multiple realities exist, shaped by individual and social contexts (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). Constructivist in its epistemology (where knowledge is co-created), interpretivism seeks meaning through qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and observations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This paradigm is well-suited to my work-based research, where the lived experiences of singers are at the forefront of understanding their needs and challenges (Winter, 2020). For example, an interpretivist study might explore how neurodivergent singers respond and adapt to more traditional pedagogical approaches. Interviews could shed light on the barriers and facilitators of their learning experiences and enable practitioners to develop a more inclusive approach to voice training (Kvale, 1996). Palkki and Caldwell (2018) conducted an interpretivist study exploring LGBTQ+ students' experiences in choral classrooms, using interviews to analyse their perceptions of safe spaces. This demonstrates how interpretivist approaches can prioritise participant narratives to uncover meaning.

However, interpretivism's focus on the subjective can present challenges in achieving replicability and generalisability of results (Schwandt, 2007). For instance, a small-scale qualitative study on neurodivergent singers' learning preferences may provide rich insights into individual experiences but they may not be generalisable to all neurodivergent singers, as their needs and responses vary widely. This limitation makes it difficult to develop broad pedagogical

recommendations solely from interpretivist findings. Interpretivist research often uses triangulation to navigate these limitations, where multiple methods or data sources are combined to bolster the validity and depth of findings (Flick, 2018). For example, Welch et al. (2019) conducted a study combining qualitative interviews with acoustic analysis to understand vocal development better, demonstrating how triangulation can strengthen interpretivist research.

Critical Theory

Critical theory builds on the principles of interpretivism by considering power dynamics and advocating for social transformation (Mertens, 2010). Ontologically, it understands that systemic inequalities can impact individual and collective realities, while its epistemology seeks to challenge and change these power dynamics, not just understand them (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). Axiologically, critical theory strongly emphasises equity, justice, and inclusivity (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). However, critical theory is also not without its challenges. Its motive to advocate and transform could lead to accusations of subjectivity or bias, especially in practitioner research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Reflexivity is therefore necessary to uphold transparency and accountability in the research process (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010).

In vocal pedagogy, critical theory can identify and address systemic barriers, such as the marginalisation of certain groups from traditional vocal pedagogies (Palkki and Caldwell, 2018). For instance, adopting a critical lens when researching how the experiences of transgender singers might be impacted by conventional pedagogical approaches that reinforce binary gender norms, critical theory not only identifies the barriers faced by transgender singers but also advocates for more inclusive practices that support and empower them as learners and performers as Palkki and Caldwell (2018) did. Their research shows the application of critical theory in contemporary voice pedagogy, challenging traditional frameworks and calling for pedagogical adaptations that accommodate the diverse vocal identities of transgender individuals.

I have found critically evaluating these paradigms to be deeply interesting and insightful in uncovering my own stances. My ontological stance is relativist, as I believe multiple realities can exist based on individual and social contexts (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). This perspective is particularly relevant in voice research, where vocal identity, perception of sound, and learning experiences vary widely between individuals (Welch et al., 2019).

Epistemologically, my position leans towards constructivism, as I believe that knowledge is co-created through the experiences and interactions I share with my clients and they amongst themselves, making qualitative and mixed-methods approaches the most likely fit for my research (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Constructivist research acknowledges that knowledge is not fixed but emerges through discourse and lived experience, an approach that aligns well with studying how singers interpret and engage with vocal training (Kvale, 1996). My axiological perspective strongly focuses on inclusivity and reflexivity, which will ensure my research is ethically grounded and actively contributes to dismantling systemic inequities in vocal pedagogy (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010).

Through this evaluation so far, I believe that integrating interpretivist and critical paradigms would help me achieve my aims of understanding the potential barriers to learning and progress faced by neurodivergent and transgender learners and help me advocate on their behalf for more inclusive and supportive approaches within voice pedagogy.

Ultimately, selecting and integrating paradigms requires careful consideration of the context and aims of my research questions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Making sure I consistently employ a reflexive practice will be essential to navigating the tensions between objectivity and subjectivity. Reflexivity involves critically examining my role in the research process and recognising how my own experiences and perspectives could influence data collection and analysis (Finlay, 2002). This is particularly important in practitioner research, where the researcher has an active role in the field they are studying (Berger, 2015).

Research Methodologies

Research methodologies are the overarching frameworks that help shape the design and execution of research; they connect philosophical paradigms to the practical methods used for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2015). In work-based environments, choosing the right methodology is essential in making sure the research aligns with the complexity and context of the environment being studied (Costley, Elliott, and Gibbs, 2010). This section critically evaluates three core methodologies: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, focusing on their relevance to practitioner researchers in vocal pedagogy.

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methodology is grounded in constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, focusing on the subjective experiences and meanings constructed by individuals (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). It seeks to understand phenomena within their natural contexts, making it especially relevant to research in vocal pedagogy, where the experiences of singers can be deeply personal and contextual (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Qualitative approaches include methodologies such as phenomenology and grounded theory (Silverman, 2020). Phenomenology is a research methodology that explores how individuals experience and interpret the world around them (van Manen, 2016). It is particularly valuable in vocal pedagogy, where the internal, sensory, and emotional aspects of singing cannot always be quantified but are central to a singer's development (Lavery, 2003). For example, a phenomenological study might explore how neurodivergent singers navigate traditional vocal pedagogy, focusing on their learning differences, sensory needs, teacher-student interactions, and other accessibility barriers (Lavery, 2003). Interviews, reflective journaling, and thematic analysis are some of the key methods, which help document the depth of participants' experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). However, phenomenology has limitations: it is highly interpretative, meaning researcher bias must be carefully managed, and its findings are often difficult to generalise due to their context-specific nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Grounded theory, in contrast, is a methodology that aims to generate new theories from data rather than testing existing hypotheses (Charmaz, 2008). It is particularly valuable for studying emergent populations, such as neurodivergent and transgender singers, where limited literature exists and established frameworks may not fully capture their experiences (Palkki and Caldwell, 2018). Grounded theory studies typically involve iterative data collection and analysis, where researchers continuously compare data to identify patterns and build theoretical models (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). For example, a grounded theory approach could explore how transgender singers develop vocal identity post-transition, leading to new frameworks for gender-affirming voice pedagogy (Charmaz, 2008). The strengths of grounded theory include its flexibility and ability to produce new insights from real-world data, but it can also be time-intensive and requires careful coding and theoretical sampling to ensure rigour (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019).

Both methodologies offer valuable insights for vocal pedagogy research but their applicability depends on the research aim: phenomenology is best suited for exploring deep, individual

experiences (van Manen, 2016), while grounded theory is ideal for developing new conceptual models that emerge from diverse participant narratives (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

While qualitative research provides deep insights into individual experiences, it is often criticised for lacking generalisability and replicability (Schwandt, 2007). Additionally, qualitative analysis is interpretative, meaning researcher bias can influence findings, meaning reflexivity is needed to maintain credibility (Finlay, 2002). The time-intensive nature of data collection, transcription, and thematic analysis can also restrict sample sizes, further limiting external validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While these limitations exist, they are countered by the depth of insight provided, especially in fields like voice pedagogy, where understanding the individual's experience is essential (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

Quantitative Methodology

Quantitative methodology aligns with positivist paradigms, focusing on objective measurement and generalisable findings (Babbie, 2010). It is suited to research that requires precision and standardisation, such as studies analysing vocal acoustics or measuring the physiological effects of singing techniques (Titze and Sundberg, 1997). As demonstrated by Titze (2000), experimental designs in quantitative research can isolate variables like breath control or resonance to measure their impact on vocal performance.

Causal-comparative and correlational designs are also standard in quantitative research, providing insights into relationships between variables (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). For instance, a correlational study could examine whether participation in choir singing correlates with improved mental health outcomes in singers (Bryman, 2006).

Despite its strengths, quantitative research is often criticised for its inability to capture the depth of participants' experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In vocal pedagogy, this can result in an overemphasis on measurable aspects like pitch and resonance whilst overlooking the emotional and psychological dimensions of singing (Titze and Verdolini Abbott, 2012). Additionally, because quantitative studies rely on fixed questions and structured data, they may not fully reflect the varied experiences of diverse participants (Bryman, 2016; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). Statistical results can also be misleading in practice, as what works on average may not apply to every individual singer (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Nevertheless, quantitative methods remain essential for research that requires clear, numerical evidence (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Mixed Methods Methodology

Mixed methods uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to leverage the strengths of both whilst also addressing their limitations (Creswell, 2015). This methodology is particularly useful in work-based research, where the complexity of real-world settings often requires a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to address different aspects of a research question (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham, 1989). For example, qualitative methodologies are ideal for exploring the lived experiences of transgender singers as they navigate vocal transition. At the same time, quantitative approaches may be better suited for analysing the physiological effects of specific vocal exercises. Mixed methods offer the flexibility to address both subjective and objective aspects of vocal pedagogy, enabling a holistic understanding (Mertens, 2010).

Mixed methods designs include convergent parallel, explanatory sequential, and exploratory sequential approaches (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). For example, a convergent parallel design might involve conducting interviews with singers (qualitative) alongside acoustic measurements of their voices (quantitative), with both data sets analysed at the same time for integrated insights (Fetters, Curry, and Creswell, 2013). An exploratory sequential approach could begin with qualitative interviews to identify themes, followed by a quantitative survey to test these findings on a larger scale (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham, 1989).

The key challenge of mixed methods is achieving true integration, where qualitative and quantitative findings inform and advance each other rather than existing as separately (Bryman, 2006). Additionally, mixed methods require significant time and resources, which may be challenging for practitioner-researchers balancing multiple responsibilities (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). However, when applied effectively, mixed methods provide a comprehensive approach to understanding complex phenomena in vocal pedagogy (Fetters, Curry and Creswell, 2013).

Research Methods in Vocal Pedagogy

Research methods are the practical tools used to gather and analyse data within a chosen methodological framework (Creswell, 2015). While methodologies provide the overarching research strategy, methods determine how data is collected, interpreted, and applied to answering research questions (Silverman, 2020). In work-based research, selecting appropriate

methods maintains alignment with the research context and aims (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). This section explores key research methods commonly used in vocal pedagogy: interviews, focus groups, and surveys, discussing their application within the field and evaluating their strengths and limitations.

Interviews in Vocal Pedagogy Research

Qualitative research often utilises interviews to capture in-depth accounts of participants experiences, beliefs, and perceptions, particularly within interpretivist and phenomenological frameworks (Kvale, 1996). This makes them particularly useful for understanding the subjective aspects of singing and vocal training (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

Semi-structured interviews balance structure with flexibility, using a set of core questions while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences in an open-ended way (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This approach was used by Kenny (2015) in her study of performance anxiety among professional singers. By using semi-structured interviews to gather personal narratives that highlighted the psychological and emotional responses to singing she was able to explore recurring themes while also capturing individual variations in experience.

While semi-structured interviews provide flexibility in exploring participant experiences, structured interviews offer a more standardised approach, ensuring that all participants are asked the same pre-set questions in a fixed order (Bryman, 2016). Although structured interviews are sometimes associated with quantitative research, they remain qualitative when questions are open-ended, allowing for detailed personal responses rather than numerical data (Silverman, 2020). For example, Welch et al. (2019) used structured interviews to explore the impact of choral singing on wellbeing. Pre-set questions ensured consistency across participants whilst capturing insights into their experiences. This structured approach enabled direct comparisons between participants while maintaining the depth of qualitative inquiry.

Interviews, despite offering deep insights, are time-consuming and resource-intensive. They require transcription, coding, and analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Researcher bias may influence the responses or interpretations, making reflexivity essential in upholding the integrity of the findings (Finlay, 2002).

Focus Groups as a Collaborative Method in Voice Research

Focus groups bring together multiple participants to discuss a particular topic, allowing for collective insights and dynamic interactions (Morgan, 1997). This method is beneficial for capturing shared experiences and contrasting perspectives, making it especially useful for research on pedagogical practices and group singing contexts (Barbour, 2018).

Levine et al. (2024) used focus groups to investigate what teachers understand about vocal health and their voice as a tool. The discussions encouraged participants to reflect on their vocal habits and consider changes to prevent strain or injury. This allowed for a comparative analysis of perspectives, revealing how pedagogical interventions and awareness strategies influence vocal health behaviours in professional settings.

Similarly, Williams (2020) utilised focus groups in her research on neurodivergent singers to assess their experiences of traditional vocal training. By facilitating a discussion-based approach, Williams captured group dynamics, patterns in shared challenges, and the collective strategies singers used to navigate conventional teaching methods.

Despite their advantages, focus groups can be dominated by more vocal participants, potentially limiting contributions from quieter individuals (Morgan, 1997). Additionally, they require skilled moderation to manage group dynamics so that discussions remain focused on the research objectives (Krueger and Casey, 2015).

Surveys and Questionnaires for Quantitative Data Collection

Surveys are a key quantitative method in vocal pedagogy research. They offer a systematic approach to collecting large-scale data on singers' experiences, training backgrounds, and vocal health (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). They are particularly useful for identifying patterns and trends that might not emerge from smaller-scale qualitative studies (Fowler, 2014).

Titze and Verdolini Abbott (2012) carried out large-scale surveys to examine the vocal health of professional voice users. They gathered quantitative data on vocal fatigue, hydration habits, and voice use patterns. Their findings provided valuable insights that have informed best practices in vocal health education.

While surveys allow for broad data collection, they have limitations in capturing depth and context (Bryman, 2016). Unlike interviews and focus groups, surveys do not allow researchers to probe deeper into individual responses or clarify ambiguities (Bryman, 2016).

Ethical Considerations and Insider Research in Work-Based Vocal Pedagogy

Ethical integrity is essential in work-based research to ensure transparency, responsibility, and respect for participants (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Insider research presents additional challenges due to power imbalances, confidentiality risks, and the need for reflexivity (Costley, Elliott, and Gibbs, 2010). This section examines informed consent, power dynamics, confidentiality, and the ethical tensions of insider research.

Informed consent ensures participants can make an autonomous decision about their involvement (British Educational Research Association, 2018). However, voluntary consent can be challenging to secure in work-based and insider research due to pre-existing relationships (Mercer, 2007). In vocal pedagogy, a voice teacher studying their students may unintentionally influence participation, as students might feel obliged to take part or provide favourable feedback due to the teacher-student hierarchy (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Similarly, singers in professional networks may feel pressured to align with dominant viewpoints rather than express honest perspectives (Moore, 2014). Researchers must clearly communicate voluntary participation, allow anonymous responses where possible, and separate research from professional roles to mitigate these risks (British Psychological Society, 2018).

Power imbalances between researcher and participant further complicate insider research (Mercer, 2007). Practitioner-researchers often hold dual roles, such as teacher-researcher or mentor-researcher, which can affect participant responses, data interpretation, and research validity (Costley, Elliott, and Gibbs, 2010). A voice teacher investigating students' experiences with a new vocal technique may find students hesitate to provide honest critiques, fearing repercussions. These dynamics risk social desirability bias, where participants adjust responses to what they perceive as more socially acceptable (Grimm, 2010). Ethical reflexivity, or continuous critical examination of the researcher's role, is essential in mitigating these risks (Finlay, 2002). This can be achieved through reflexive journaling to identify biases, track decision-making, and engage in iterative cycles of reflection throughout the research process (Berger, 2015).

Confidentiality and data protection present additional challenges, particularly in vocal communities, where anonymity is difficult to maintain (Wilkinson, 2013). A study on transgender singers in classical voice training, for example, may involve sensitive disclosures about gender identity and vocal transition. Researchers must anonymise data carefully by removing identifying details and making sure participants have control over how their contributions are represented (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Adhering to ethical frameworks like the British Psychological Society's (2018) Code of Ethics and Conduct is critical in maintaining participant trust and data security.

Despite these challenges, insider research provides significant advantages.

Practitioner-researchers possess deep contextual knowledge, which fosters trust and engagement (Herr and Anderson, 2015). A researcher studying neurodivergent singers' experiences may be better positioned to identify sensory and cognitive accessibility barriers, ensuring findings accurately reflect participants' lived realities (Coates, 2022). Additionally, co-designing research with participants, such as working with transgender singers to develop inclusive pedagogical strategies, ensures that research is participatory rather than extractive, prioritising community-led solutions (Mertens, 2010). When ethical challenges are carefully managed, insider research can make meaningful contributions to voice pedagogy and beyond.

Conclusion

This assignment has deepened my understanding of how research paradigms, methodologies, and ethical considerations intersect within work-based vocal pedagogy. Studying positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory has reinforced how important aligning methodological choices with the complexity of real-world practice is, particularly when working with transgender and neurodivergent singers (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Palkki and Caldwell, 2018). Exploring qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches has demonstrated the value of methodological flexibility, highlighting the need to balance objective data collection with capturing lived experiences that shape vocal development (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Titze and Verdolini Abbott, 2012).

Through critically examining research methods, I have developed a more nuanced approach to studying vocal identity formation, accessibility barriers, and pedagogical inclusivity (Coates, 2022). I now recognise that insider research requires continuous reflexivity to ensure that my

dual role as a practitioner and researcher does not compromise ethical integrity (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002).

This knowledge will directly inform my research approach. When investigating neurodivergent singers' experiences, I will prioritise research designs that allow for participant-led insights while ensuring data collection methods accommodate sensory and cognitive differences (Costley, Elliott, and Gibbs, 2010). Similarly, when exploring gender-affirming vocal pedagogy, I will integrate methodologies that challenge traditional vocal classification systems and amplify the voices of transgender singers (Palkki and Caldwell, 2018). Ethical considerations, particularly regarding informed consent, power dynamics, and confidentiality, will remain central to my research design (British Educational Research Association, 2018; British Psychological Society, 2018).

By applying these insights, I aim to conduct methodologically rigorous research that is also meaningful and transformative within voice pedagogy. This process has equipped me with the critical tools necessary to ensure that my future research actively contributes to more inclusive and accessible voice training practices (Mertens, 2010).

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