

Voice, Positionality and Workplace Dynamics: Designing Inclusive and Collaborative Research on Neurodivergent Vocal Masking Strategies

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26/01/2025

Word Count: 4,035

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1. Introduction

Research into the intersection between voice use and neurodivergent masking presents unique complexities for the researcher. As a voice practitioner interested in using voice training to foster a greater sense of experienced authenticity for neurodivergent and other stigmatised individuals, it is important for me to familiarise myself with the potential challenges and roadblocks involved in conducting such research, particularly in workplace settings where social dynamics may affect participants' voice use and communication styles.

In this essay, I aim to develop a critical awareness of the key issues involved in conducting research into the vocal strategies that neurodivergent individuals use to conceal aspects of their identity within the very environments where they employ such strategies. I draw from literature into researcher positionality and the challenges it can present when researching sensitive topics with stigmatised or hidden groups and individuals (Adikaram, Weerakotuwa, and Liyanage, [2022](#)).

A central consideration of this essay is the neurodivergent paradigm (Dwyer, [2022](#)), a relatively recent addition to the literature that emphasises the value of incorporating the perspectives of neurodivergent individuals into the research process itself. It presents a contrast to the predominant disorder paradigm of neurodiversity that is historically present within much existing literature on neurodiversity (Sonuga-Barke, [2023](#)). The disorder paradigm frames neurodevelopmental conditions as single and discrete dysfunctions of the brain, aiming to correct these perceived deficits; the neurodivergent paradigm argues this narrative creates stigma and ineffective interventions, instead reframing neurodivergence as natural variations in human cognition and experience (Sonuga-Barke, [2023](#)). As a neurodivergent individual myself, this paradigm presents me both with opportunities to contribute to more inclusive research and potential issues relating to insider research, ethics, and the potential for bias.

By exploring the interplay between positivism and interpretivism through the lens of this neurodivergent paradigm, I will explore the challenges of insider research and ethics, and propose a selection of methodological choices for designing research studies. Through critical evaluation of these components, I aim to offer insight into how utilizing a multi-method approach can balance theoretical rigour with ethical sensitivity when addressing the lived experiences of marginalised groups.

Regarding methodology and research methods, I explore a multi-method approach combining primarily qualitative methods of action research, ethnography, and phenomenology to explore the themes of voice, authenticity, and the impact of societal structures. Action research, in particular, provides a cyclical and practical process that can benefit me as a researcher and voice practitioner by offering a counterpoint to my personal habitual bias towards more authoritarian, logical, and propositional epistemological approaches (Sol and Heng, [2022](#)).

Ultimately, the aim of this essay is to gain an understanding of the important factors for designing research studies that consider the complex interplay of social dynamics, communication patterns and neurodivergent experiences within largely neurotypical work-based settings.

2. Paradigms

The neurodiversity paradigm offers an ideal core framework for my research interest in the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals in workplace settings and the impact of this context on their voice use (Cook et al., [2020](#)), communication styles (Crompton et al., [2020](#)), and feelings of authenticity (Cha et al., [2019](#)). A relatively recent addition to the scientific literature, the neurodiversity paradigm challenges the traditional medical model, or deficit model, which has tended to treat neurodevelopmental differences as impairments that need correction (Dwyer, [2022](#)).

Proponents of the neurodiversity paradigm argue that the medical model of neurodivergence, with its implicit drive to correct the perceived deficits in the communication styles of neurodivergent individuals, has often led to harmful outcomes for those individuals such as burnout, anxiety, and social stigma (Hull, Levy, et al., [2021](#)). These negative outcomes have been linked to the practice of masking, or camouflaging, referring to the strategies neurodivergent individuals use to hide their innate social behaviours (Cook et al., [2020](#)). Masking and its intersection with voice use and authenticity is one of my core research interests.

The neurodiversity paradigm seeks to overcome the limitations of the deficit model by bringing neurodivergent voices into the research process itself (Sonuga-Barke, [2023](#)) and intersects with broader philosophical frameworks like positivism and interpretivism (Alharahsheh and Pius, [2020](#)).

Positivism relies on studying measurable phenomena to create generalizable laws, aiming for objectivity and the exclusion of human bias. Within voice research, an example of positivist research

could be to measure the patterns of voice change over a range of different participant ages to generalise the effects of ageing on the voice (Eichhorn et al., [2018](#)). A disadvantage of applying this approach to neurodiversity research is that positivism can struggle to account for the complex lived realities of individuals (Alharahsheh and Pius, [2020](#)). Historically, for example, autistic individuals have often been misrepresented in positivist research as lacking social skills by only focusing on externally observable behaviours and how they align with neurotypical communication norms, with no consideration for the lived experience of those individuals (Botha, [2021](#)). Positivism's focus on norm-referenced measurements may exclude neurodivergent outliers, reinforcing the social norms that the neurodiversity paradigm seeks to address.

Interpretivism offers an alternative to positivist research by focusing on subjective experience and the impact of social context (Alharahsheh and Pius, [2020](#)). This approach is better suited to the voice research that I wish to carry out in workplace settings as it examines how factors like environment and culture shape individual behaviours. Interpretivism is more aligned with the neurodiversity paradigm because it prioritizes a richness of personal narratives over the creation of universal laws that is the goal of positivism (Alharahsheh and Pius, [2020](#)). For instance, exploring how neurodivergent individuals use their voice in workplace communication requires me, as a researcher, to be sensitive to the unique social dynamics at play in those settings, rather than ignoring those dynamics in an attempt to fit vocal behaviours into generalized categories.

My own personal epistemological biases reflect the interplay between these interpretive and positivist paradigms. As a researcher with a background in robotics, I am more accustomed to conducting studies that prioritize measurable data and objectivity. As I have shifted to studying and teaching voice and communication, it has become clear to me that solely focusing on the biomechanical structures and measurable acoustic properties of the voice is inadequate for creating transformative teaching experiences that prioritise my students' authentic vocal expression. Voice use is deeply influenced by an individual's beliefs, experiences, and social context (Cazden, [2023](#)). By incorporating interpretivist methods, I propose a research design that accounts for these dynamics and generates research that contributes to positive changes in the lives of the participants and my students. This approach aligns with a common aim of the neurodiversity paradigm to create positive social change through research (Dwyer, [2022](#)).

3. Methodologies

The choice of methodological approach is critical in research design and is affected by various factors including the research objectives, purpose of investigation, environment, data, and researcher's background (Reiter, Stewart, and Bruce, 2010).

The following objectives of my proposed research design, which may form a basis of future practical research, will affect my choice of methodological approach:

1. To explore the dynamics of workplace communication norms that lead neurodivergent individuals to engage in masking behaviours, focusing on vocal communication.
2. To contribute to the literature in the under-researched topic of vocal masking behaviours.
3. To develop actionable recommendations, tools and frameworks for businesses and my voice practice to foster authentic, inclusive communication practices.
4. To align with the aims of the neurodiversity paradigm, generating research that is actively shaped by the very neurodivergent individuals involved in the research (Shaw et al., 2024).

From these objectives and my previously outlined decision to prioritise the interpretivist paradigm, it makes sense to focus on either a qualitative or qualitative-first mixed methods approach. Below are explanations of these approaches presented within the context of this decision.

3.1. Quantitative research

Quantitative research aims to provide a broad understanding of measurable patterns through statistical procedures and objective deduction (Reiter, Stewart, and Bruce, 2010). It often starts by establishing a cause-effect relationship based on established theories then seeks to identify further correlations with researchers adopting a dispassionate, value-free role (Reiter, Stewart, and Bruce, 2010). Strengths of a qualitative approach include the comparatively short time frame of research and the generation of generalizable numerical data; weaknesses include the requirement for large sample sizes and a potential lack of depth (Choy, 2014).

In the context of my research, a quantitative approach seems inappropriate as it less suited to exploring nuanced behaviours, emotions, and the lived experiences of individuals (Reiter, Stewart,

and Bruce, 2010). These subjective dynamics are key to my research interest into how a person's lived experiences affect their voice use. Studying complex phenomena like human social behaviours within workplace cultures – particularly in modern businesses where group compositions constantly shift – may make it challenging, if not impossible, to establish meaningful cause-and-effect relationships (Hackman, 2012).

3.2. Qualitative research

Qualitative research focuses on studying phenomena within their natural environments, emphasizing depth, complexity, and rich contextual detail (Reiter, Stewart, and Bruce, 2010). Such methods are particularly effective for exploring phenomena such as participants' life experiences, behaviours, emotions, and the complex interactions within social settings (Reiter, Stewart, and Bruce, 2010), with weaknesses including the time-consuming nature of research and strong impact of researcher interpretation of data (Choy, 2014).

A qualitative approach aligns well with my research objectives and the values-based nature of research within the neurodiversity paradigm (Ward, 2021). Rather than aiming to eliminate a researcher's subjective experiences and biases, a qualitative approach instead addresses them by incorporating critical exploration of the researcher's positionality (Neville, 2022).

3.3. Mixed methods

A mixed methods approach seeks to combine the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research, with each approach accounting for the weaknesses of the other through either concurrent or sequential use (Reiter, Stewart, and Bruce, 2010). It is particularly effective for studying complex systems, where qualitative findings validate and add depth to quantitative data, which in turn facilitates generalisation (Fetters, Curry, and Creswell, 2013). Limitations include difficulties in truly integrating the two data types, the impact of the researchers' preferred methodology, and mismatched timelines (Bryman, 2007).

Within the context of my research, a mixed methods approach could be beneficial using a qualitative-first process; with the results of early qualitative study providing specific variables for testing in later quantitative study. For example, quantitative methods could complement a broader study of the vocal patterns involved in neurodivergent to complement comparable studies into broader masking strategies (Cook et al., 2020).

4. Designs

Selecting a suitable research design allows researchers to match their chosen methodology to the study's overall objectives. Qualitative studies often integrate multiple designs to mitigate the potential limitations of each (Reiter, Stewart, and Bruce, 2010).

To investigate neurodivergent vocal masking in the workplace, I propose a three-level research design combining action research (Baluyot, 2019; Sparre, 2020), ethnography (Goulding, 2005; Bagatell, 2007; Jones and Smith, 2017), and phenomenology (Murray et al., 2023).

With this combined strategy, I propose that this research design can simultaneously contribute to the knowledge on neurodivergent employees' lived experiences and affect practical changes within participating organisations. As a voice teacher, I hope this design will contribute towards the development of a robust, research-based process that can form the foundations of my voice training approach for business communication.

4.1. Action Research

Action research combines enquiry and action in a cyclic process of planning, implementing, reflecting and adapting to foster both meaningful change and knowledge generation (Baluyot, 2019). This design emphasises collaboration with participants acting as co-researchers who actively shape the study's outcomes (Sparre, 2020).

Action research, with its collaborative and transformative focus, aligns well with my goal of developing a practical vocal pedagogy for inclusive workplace communication. Its effectiveness for this type of culture change is evidenced by Sparre (2020), who used it to transform an organisation's culture through collective collaboration, and Baluyot (2019), who addressed cross-cultural integration challenges, highlighting the design's potential to foster understanding and inclusivity.

Potential challenges of action research include the unstructured nature of its cyclic process, lack of a clear end point, and unpredictable outcomes (Baluyot, 2019). This can lead to uncertainty, particularly when applied in businesses where employees are used to a more top-down, prescriptive approach to learning and change (Sparre, 2020).

4.2. Ethnography

Ethnography encompasses a broad set of research methods that investigate cultural and social practices through prolonged immersion in the participants' lived realities, facilitating a deep understanding of those participants' language, behaviours, identities and values (Bagatell, 2007; Jones and Smith, 2017).

Bagatell (2007) demonstrates the strength of this design for capturing neurodivergent lived experiences through extensive participant observation and narrative analysis. While this long-term engagement allows for detailed investigation, the considerable time and resources required for ethnography can create practical constraints on study length (Jones and Smith, 2017).

I propose incorporating ethnographic methods, such as interviews and observations, as secondary elements to enhance the depth of action research. By focusing on building trust and rapport with participants, I hope to authentically represent participants' lived experiences (Fina, 2019).

4.3. Phenomenology

Phenomenology seeks to understand the subjective, lived experience of participants by uncovering the meanings they attach to events and interactions (Murray et al., 2023). In contrast to ethnography, it emphasizes individual interpretations over cultural dynamics (Goulding, 2005).

Within the neurodivergent paradigm, appropriately applied phenomenology offers a way to counteract deficit-based research by centring on participants' perspectives (Murray et al., 2023; Ekdahl, 2024). By incorporating a phenomenological philosophy, I aim to frame my research on the neurodivergent employees' understanding of their own experiences and reduce the impact of my own biases.

5. Methods

Method selection is guided by the overarching methodology and research design. For my proposed design, primarily combining action research and ethnography, I have identified three qualitative methods that combine to form a multi-layered approach to researching neurodivergent vocal masking in workplace settings.

My high-level reasons for choosing these methods are:

- Interviews — Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews (Fina, 2019) provide a method to deeply understand participants' individual experiences of their own neurodivergence and voice use in their workplace without the influence of the group social dynamics that might cause them to engage in masking (Hollander, 2004).
- Focus groups — Focus groups allow a unique opportunity to observe the social interactions and group dynamics that may elicit masking behaviours from neurodivergent participants (Hollander, 2004). By curating the focus group composition, the research design can create conditions that either elicit such behaviours or encourage more authentic expressions from the participants and contribute to the positive outcomes of action research (Sparre, 2020).
- Observations — I propose incorporating observations of participants throughout the research process, within their natural workplace settings, during interviews, and in focus groups. This approach allows the research to capture participants' vocal and communicative patterns, offering a richer understanding than self-reported data alone; such direct observation is essential for ethnographic design that prioritises capturing of participant behaviours (Fina, 2019).

By combining personal narratives, group dynamics, and workplace observations, I propose that this design can generate practical strategies and inclusive communication frameworks that reflect the lived realities of neurodivergent individuals.

5.1. Interviews

Interviews are a foundational method in qualitative research, allowing the generation of detailed insights into participants' experiences and perspectives (Fina, 2019). Bagatell (2007) demonstrates the effectiveness of open-ended, participant-led interviews for capturing the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals, with a focus on building rapport and trust.

Potential pitfalls of interviews include the high variability of gathered data and the impact of the researcher's presence on the information shared by participants; these can be addressed by incorporating a reflexive practice that critically evaluates these dynamics into the research process (Fina, 2019).

5.2. Focus Groups

Focus groups involve small, curated groups of participants coming together to discuss the topic of research (Hollander, 2004). In action research, curated focus groups can drive problem identification, reflections, and working plans (Baluyot, 2019).

A potential challenge of focus groups involves the impact of the social setting on participant disclosure, with social pressures causing individuals to withhold information (problematic silences) or provide information that doesn't reflect their true beliefs (problematic speech) (Hollander, 2004).

When researching vocal masking in the workplace, this dynamic presents both challenges and opportunities. Neurodivergent participants may already feel pressure to mask during group discussions so may engage in problematic silences or speech, though my insider status as a neurodivergent person may lessen the impact of this dynamic (Neville, 2022). However, Hollander (2004) emphasizes the distinct opportunity focus groups provide to examine the social processes and interactions that shape discussions. This may make focus groups an ideal method to observe vocal masking behaviours and how they manifest in a group dynamic.

5.3. Observations

Observations provide a method to gain insights into participants' behaviours rather than relying on their subjective perspectives and language; it is often used to supplement data obtained during interviews (Polkinghorne, 2005).

As a voice teacher, I often rely on my observations of clients' vocal patterns for information, particularly during early sessions when they lack vocabulary to accurately describe their own vocal patterns and behaviours. For this reason, observations are a core method that underlies all other methods during the research process.

Due to the complex social dynamics and variability associated with neurodivergent masking strategies, it may be useful at some points in the research process to allow participants to observe videos of themselves interacting socially to identify their own masking behaviours, as in the study by Cook et al. (2020) into autistic masking strategies.

6. Insider Research Issues

Insider research refers to studies in which researchers share characteristics or lived experiences with the population under study; it can contribute to a better understanding of participants' identities, improved communication and a richer relationship with participant groups (Neville, 2022). While this shared identity can enable deeper access and insights, it can pose complexities including the impact of researcher bias and conflict of interests when reporting findings, particularly in research involving stigmatized groups (Adikaram, Weerakotuwa, and Liyanage, 2022).

Positionality — the researcher's relationship to the researched — plays a critical role when navigating these advantages and limitations (Adikaram, Weerakotuwa, and Liyanage, 2022). My own positionality in this research topic is both complex and fluid: I am an insider as a neurodivergent person living within a neurotypical social culture and familiar with masking behaviours; however, I am an outsider to working in conventional business environments, which are the contextual focus of this proposed research design. Adikaram, Weerakotuwa, and Liyanage (2022) suggest that my variable positionality is common as researchers rarely exist as strict insiders or outsiders, instead occupying an in-between space. Indeed, even when a researcher is an insider, their role as an academic researcher can lend them the status of an outsider during the study (Neville, 2022).

Recruitment issues, which are common in qualitative research, can be improved by a researcher's position as an insider, particularly when the research involves participants' stigmatized identities (Neville, 2022). As neurodivergent masking behaviours are often tied to fears of social rejection (Hull, Petrides, et al., 2017), my position as a neurodivergent person could facilitate recruitment but only if I can demonstrate to neurodivergent participants that I am conducting the research ethically and in a way that is respectful to their delicate position (Neville, 2022).

The potential for researcher bias is a common issue in insider research, though it exists no matter the researcher's positionality (McAreavey and Das, 2013; Neville, 2022). Adikaram, Weerakotuwa, and Liyanage (2022) emphasize the need for researchers to engage in a practice of reflexivity throughout all stages of the research process; reflexivity is the practice of critically examining one's biases and positionality, providing a strategy for mitigating the complexities of insider research. For my research, this means continually reflecting on how my neurodivergent identity and outsider status in business influence not only my interpretations of participant behaviour but also how participants engage with me.

7. Ethics

Ethics represents a foundational element of social research, encompassing principles like confidentiality, informed consent, and the minimisation of harm (Vilma, 2018).

Of particular importance when researching neurodivergent employees are the principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice (Vilma, 2018):

- Autonomy — The right of participants to choose their level of involvement in the research with informed consent as to its objectives; which could conflict with the goals of their employer organization (McAreavey and Das, 2013).
- Beneficence — The researchers obligation to maximize benefits of the research to both participants and society, a key tenet of the neurodiversity paradigm (Dwyer, 2022).
- Justice — The requirement to avoid coercing participants to join the research, which could involve managing the power potential power imbalances caused by negotiating with workplace gatekeepers (McAreavey and Das, 2013).

Bernard et al. (2023) highlight that research studies adopting the neurodiversity paradigm should serve as models of ethical inclusion through their research design; this includes involving neurodivergent research team members and actively incorporating neurodivergent participants in the research process through participatory study designs. These recommendations align with my choice of action research as the foundational design and my presence as a neurodivergent researcher.

The role of gatekeepers is an important ethical concern in my proposed research design in workplace settings; gatekeepers being those that mediate access to participants (McAreavey and Das, 2013). Where businesses function as gatekeepers, the organisational objectives may conflict with the research goals of addressing the communication needs of neurodivergent employees (Longmire, Vogus, and Colella, 2025). McAreavey and Das (2013) propose employing a framework of phronesis to address the conflicts of working with gatekeepers in research into marginalized groups. Phronesis provides an alternative to more conventional, static approaches to research ethics; it calls for researchers to engage in dynamic decision-making and reflexivity to continually evaluate the researcher's own positionality in relation to both the gatekeepers and participants (McAreavey and Das, 2013).

8. Conclusion

Researching the intersection of neurodivergent masking and voice use in the workplace settings presents a unique opportunity to contribute both academic knowledge and practical change in workplace communication. In this essay, I have explored the complexity of designing such research, emphasizing the importance of aligning methodology with the neurodiversity paradigm (Dwyer, 2022) to focus the study on the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals.

The neurodiversity paradigm (Dwyer, 2022) provides a foundational framework for this work, challenging the conventional deficit-based models that have historically dominated research on neurodivergence research (Sonuga-Barke, 2023). By prioritizing the perspectives of neurodivergent individuals, my proposed research design aligns with an interpretivist paradigm that values subjective experiences and social context (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

By adopting a multi-method qualitative methodology that combines research designs of action research (Baluyot, 2019; Sparre, 2020), ethnography (Bagatell, 2007; Jones and Smith, 2017), and phenomenology (Goulding, 2005; Murray et al., 2023), I propose a research design that creates a layered approach to research for ethically exploring the complex social dynamics that influence the vocal strategies employed in neurodivergent masking on individual, group, and organisational levels. Action research offers a collaborative and iterative process that enlists study participants as co-researchers to create meaningful change in their own organisation (Baluyot, 2019).

Ethnography and phenomenology enrich this research design by providing a deeper understanding of how the participants' lived realities influence their communication patterns in the workplace. Ethnographic methods, such as interviews and observations, allow for observing the social dynamics that affect vocal masking (Bagatell, 2007), while phenomenology focuses on understanding the subjective meanings neurodivergent individuals attach to their own experiences (Murray et al., 2023). Together, these approaches offer a holistic view of the interplay between voice, authenticity, and workplace dynamics, while also addressing the ethical imperative to represent participants' experiences authentically (Fina, 2019).

Ethical considerations and the dynamics of insider research are central to my proposed research design. As a neurodivergent person with little experience working in an organizational context, my position as insider-outsider offers both opportunities and challenges (Adikaram, Weerakotuwa,

and Liyanage, [2022](#); Neville, [2022](#)). Employing a reflexive framework of phronesis (McAreavey and Das, [2013](#)) is an essential part of this proposed design as it can allow me to make dynamic, context-sensitive ethical decisions and navigating my positionality as a researcher between participants and gatekeepers.

With this research design, I aim to bridge academic inquiry and practical application by fostering a more inclusive culture of workplace communication in participating organisations. By addressing neurodivergent vocal masking through a multi-method, ethically grounded approach, I hope to empower neurodivergent individuals while deepening knowledge of their lived experiences. In my voice practice, I hope this work will contribute to the creation of a research-based process I can use to support authentic and inclusive business communication through the application of authenticity-focused voice pedagogy (Cazden, [2023](#)).

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