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“The Full Monty”: Taking a Fully Qualitative Approach to Research *By Singers, With Singers, For Singers*

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ABSTRACT

This article extends the scholarly conversation on research within performing arts voice disciplines by exploring how “fully qualitative” research can help bridge the gap between rigorous and relevant research. Fully qualitative research is informed by a qualitative sensibility which values the subjectivity of researcher and participant, and encourages reflexivity, transparency, and criticality throughout the research process. Taking singing voice research as an example, the article presents a reflective review of trends in this field, identifying the dominance of the scientific approach. Fully qualitative research is presented as a way to gain new insights into singing which are unlikely to flow from research using the scientific method. The article outlines how a fully qualitative approach *by singers* to conducting rigorous research *with singers* can produce findings which are relevant *for singers*. While illustrative examples are presented from singing voice research, voice practitioners and researchers from other disciplines are encouraged to consider a fully qualitative approach in their research and to develop an awareness of quality indicators. Fully qualitative voice research complements existing scientific knowledge and has the potential to make significant contributions to our understanding of the role of voice in human life.


KEYWORDS

Qualitative research; practitioner-research; methodology; singing voice research; quality

Introduction

Readers of a certain age may remember the wildly popular British film from the 1990s, *The Full Monty*, which tells the slightly incredulous story of a group of unemployed men who decide to form a male stripper group. For those Stateside, “the full Monty” is like “the whole box and dice”, “the whole shebang,” or “the whole nine yards.” Essentially, going “the full Monty” means that if you are going to do something, embrace it fully! In this article I aim to inspire voice researchers, and particularly practitioner-researchers, to go “the full Monty” when conducting qualitative research by embracing a “fully qualitative” perspective. I argue that a fully qualitative approach, conducted with reference to quality indicators, can advance the field of voice research in exciting new directions.

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Increasingly, voice practitioners—particularly those working within higher education institutions (see e.g. Oram 2015)—are engaging in research. Various research approaches have been presented in the *Voice and Speech Review*, with a focus on guiding practitioners looking to enter the world of research (e.g. Oram 2015, Scott 2022, Winter 2021). Scott (2022) provides a comprehensive roadmap for practitioner-researchers to undertake research studies investigating practice. Scott outlines the challenges for practitioner-researchers within a field dominated by scientific inquiry; for example, most singing voice educators will come from a performance background with little to no training in the scientific method. Additionally, as Oram (2015) acknowledges, voice practitioners may find themselves teaching within academic institutions where research is an expectation of the role. Scott (2022) outlines some of the many benefits of practitioner-research for both the researcher themselves, and for the broader community of research and practice. Winter (2021) argues that in examining the existing body of knowledge, it is helpful to consider the rigor and relevance of research. Winter positions practitioner-research as a way to bridge the divide between rigorously conducted research (which may have limited application to practice) and relevant practical texts (which are often based more on practice than research).

The rigor-relevance heuristic is very useful when conceptualizing research within a particular field because it prompts questions for reflection: Who is doing the research, how is it being done, with whom, and for whom? Within the field of singing voice research,¹ and despite calls to take different approaches to research, the answer to these questions still lands us squarely within the scientific paradigm. In this article, fully qualitative research is offered as another worthy approach to voice research, which can complement scientific knowledge and rigorously create new, relevant knowledge of the voice.

The article is structured as follows. First, I define “fully qualitative” research (Braun and Clarke 2021b). Second, I justify the approach I have taken in writing this article as a blend of reflective and conceptual (but not systematic) review. Third, I discuss trends in singing voice research, noting that the field has been dominated by the scientific paradigm, with practitioner-research and qualitative studies constituting “late breaking developments.” Fourth, I provide examples of fully qualitative research conducted by singers, with singers as participants, which, I argue, produces research relevant to singers and to broader practice (e.g. within industry and education). This discussion covers methodologies and methods, considerations for data collection and analysis, and researcher reflexivity. It concludes with outlining some of the challenges of fully qualitative research and key quality indicators to encourage high quality work and critical evaluation. I conclude with my answer to the “So What?” question (Sansom 2021), making the case that more fully qualitative research is needed to advance the field of singing voice research.

While I have used singing research as an example throughout, the arguments and examples could apply equally to other disciplines within the field of performing arts voice.

What Is Fully Qualitative Research?

The methodological literature distinguishes “Big Q” and “little q” qualitative research. Kidder and Fine (1987) were the first to outline “Big Q” research as involving field work and observation (e.g. ethnography), which is largely

unstructured and inductive (bottom up). Conversely, “little q” refers to the inclusion of qualitative or non-numerical data in research designs based on hypothesis and deduction (top down) (Kidder and Fine 1987, Willig 2013). According to Braun and Clarke (2021b, 7), “Big Q qualitative uses qualitative tools and techniques within a qualitative paradigm. Small q qualitative uses these techniques within a quantitative paradigm.” Throughout this article, I adopt Braun and Clarke’s, (2021b, 283) “fully qualitative” research to refer to a “Big Q” approach to qualitative research.

The purpose of fully qualitative research is to understand experience and to explore participants’ meaning making (Braun and Clarke 2021b, Willig 2013) rather than seeking to predict cause and effect (Crotty 1998, Lather 2004). These meanings are understood to be socially, culturally, and historically situated (Braun and Clarke 2021b, Kidder and Fine 1987, Lather 2004, Willig 2013). Fully qualitative studies often seek to “give voice” to the experiences of a particular group of a particular phenomenon (Braun and Clarke 2013, Larkin, Watts, and Clifton 2006). Ontologically and epistemologically, while multiple theories exist within a qualitative paradigm (such as interpretivism, constructionism, critical realism), broadly speaking, fully qualitative researchers view the world as “only-ever partially knowable” (Braun and Clarke 2021b, 6), rather than directly observable and reportable. Fully qualitative research questions are framed openly and iteratively to explore meaning (Braun and Clarke 2013, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022), for example, “How do professional opera singers experience menopause?” (paraphrased from Waters 2023). A fully qualitative approach is characterized by a “qualitative sensibility” (Braun and Clarke 2021b, 293) which views “meaning as contextual and situated”, and values researcher subjectivity as a resource rather than a bias to be managed. The researcher’s (reflexive) interpretation of the data is viewed as contributing to new knowledge (Braun and Clarke 2020, Braun and Clarke 2021a, Braun and Clarke 2021b, Roulston 2006, Willig 2013).

A qualitative sensibility is ideally suited to performing arts voice research, where the researcher can draw on expertise derived from practice, not only to pose novel and exploratory research questions, but also to inform data analysis and produce findings which are impactful on practice. One can see how this inductive, generative approach to research might play out in singing voice pedagogy research. As an example, take a research study seeking to understand certain practices within the singing voice studios of a conservatoire. As the researcher observes more and more lessons with different teachers and students, the complexity of the pedagogical interactions becomes increasingly apparent (Cox 2020, Cox and Forbes 2022). Research questions and directions change in response to the unfolding interactions within the field, and it is not necessary to adhere to fixed hypotheses or questions. Moreover, if the researcher is an insider (Roulston 2006) (either to the profession or the conservatoire where the study is being undertaken), they may observe certain subtleties and nuances of interaction which would not be detected by an outsider observer. Thus, within fully qualitative research, the insider practitioner-researcher can use their own subjectivity and insider position as a resource to understand with more depth and insight a complex scenario than would be possible operating within a quantitative paradigm (see also Scott 2022).

A Reflective and Conceptual Review

To make the case for why more fully qualitative research would be a welcome addition to the singing voice literature, it is necessary to consider the nature of the existing body of knowledge. To do this, I have undertaken a reflective and conceptual review. Reflective research uses the findings of existing empirical research as a starting point for the review of issues important to the field (Bassey 1992, Burnard 2006). Having conducted multiple qualitative studies on singing, I reflected on the scarcity of research which adopts similar approaches. As an editor, peer reviewer, and thesis examiner, I have at times noticed a lack of awareness around what constitutes quality qualitative research. For example, simply stating the researcher used “thematic analysis” to analyze interview data without stating any reasons why, or explaining (even briefly) researcher position, is not considered good practice within qualitative research.²

Like reflective reviews in other fields (e.g. Sousa and Voss 2002), my approach here is conceptual rather than systematic. This is a deliberate and reflexive choice. As Ayala (2018) notes, systematic reviews can fall short of capturing a sense of what is *not* contained within a body of literature. Rather than seeking to establish cause and effect like a systematic review, a conceptual review tends to be interpretative, thinking more universally (Ayala 2018). Adopting a reflective stance places a critical lens over existing (oftentimes canonical) literatures to provide new conceptual insights by asking, “What do the canonical literatures *not* tell us? Whose voices—researcher and participant—are silenced or diminished in the canonical research?” Conceptual reviews can draw “attention to substantive domains that have not yet received adequate attention” (Yadav 2010, 5), suggesting new directions for research (Hulland 2020).

With this approach in mind, I now turn to a critical examination of trends in singing voice research, where there is a predominance of scientific studies, and a dearth of fully qualitative approaches.

Trends in Singing Voice Research

The Dominance of Science

Despite the recent (and welcomed) conversation within *Voice and Speech Review* about the value of practitioner-research, the scientific model has dominated singing voice research to date. This dominance goes to the heart of the rigor-relevance divide (Winter 2021): rigorous scientific research can make important new discoveries, but the implications for practice are not always immediately obvious (Callaghan 2014, McCoy 2012).³ Books like Callaghan’s *Singing and Science* (2014), McCoy’s *Your Voice: An Inside View* (McCoy 2016) and *The Vocal Athlete* by LeBorgne and Rosenberg (2021) translate scientific advances for application in the singing voice studio, bridging the divide between science and pedagogical practice. In discussing the relationship between voice scientists and singing teachers, McCoy (2012) reflects that neither gets things right all the time. Just as singers and singing teachers may not be completely across the science, scientists are not always completely across the singing. He further remarks that “there are aspects of how we sing on a practical, expressive level that transcend quantitative analysis” (McCoy 2012, 528).

Identifying where most singing voice research is published allows us to consider what messages this sends to the field. Winter (2021, 79) notes that the *Journal of Voice* is a highly esteemed scientific journal publishing predominantly quantitative studies “with little scope for practice-based research.” The *Journal of Voice* is the premiere outlet for the publication of voice medicine research. However, because the journal is the official journal of interdisciplinary organization, The Voice Foundation (in addition to International Association of Phonosurgery), the journal has historically included a significant amount of singing voice research. Indeed, in a review of trends in singing voice research, Pestana et al. (2019) searched journals indexed in PubMed to ascertain the level of activity in singing voice research for the period from 1949 to the end of 2016. The search identified that the *Journal of Voice* contained the greatest number of research articles on the singing voice, confirming, at least within the scientific literature, that it is the premier publication outlet for singing voice research. In terms of trends, interestingly the analysis revealed that prior to 2010 there was an emphasis on research involving classical singers and the organic structure of the voice, but from 2011 onwards, the emphasis shifted to voice function and training effects. This suggests an increasing concern within voice science with conducting research relevant to studio practice.

In addition to identifying research trends, the review by Pestana et al. (2019) is instructive because of the research it omits. The article reported on results from searching the PubMed database which only indexes biomedical and life sciences research. Dedicated voice journals such as *Journal of Singing*, *Australian Voice*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*, and *Voice and Speech Review* were not included in the search. While lack of time was acknowledged as a limitation on the scope of the search, nevertheless, the authors implicitly disclose their positioning—that only scientific research counts—by using PubMed exclusively to locate examples of singing voice research, thus omitting any research published in outlets connected with practice. The review also omits singing voice research published in other leading interdisciplinary journals in music psychology, music cognition, and music education, such as *Psychology of Music*, *Musicae Scientiae*, and *British Journal of Music Education*.

Using Pestana et al.’s (2019) search terms as a base, I conducted a search of articles within *Journal of Voice* for reports which take a qualitative perspective on research involving singers as participants. In addition to search terms, inclusion criteria were that studies used (at least some) singers as research participants and explicitly mentioned qualitative methodology and/or methods. This search returned eight results, representing just 1.6% of all research articles in the *Journal of Voice* on singing.⁴ However, none of these studies could be described as “fully qualitative.”

It is not surprising to find that there are few fully qualitative studies published in the *Journal of Voice*; from its inception, the publication has been a scientific journal which reports the findings of leading scientists internationally. However, the fact that a scientific journal *is* the leading journal in the field sends a message to prospective and novice researchers that to publish (respected) singing voice research, you need to be trained in the scientific method (see also Scott 2022, Winter 2021). To date, the game of singing voice research has very much been played by the rules of the scientific method. To be

clear, this is not to discount the value of such research but rather to make the point that such an approach is just *one way* of researching singing. Scientific studies can provide us with incredible insight, but ultimately provide us with pieces of a complex puzzle, rather than a holistic view of the singing experience.

Considering Complexity

The predominance of scientific research on the singing voice reflects larger social and cultural forces in which Western thought has favored “science, logic, and reductionism over intuition and holism” (Meadows 2008, Loc. 211; McGilchrist 2009, McGilchrist 2021). In writing about systems thinking and complexity, Meadows (2008, Loc. 175) describes a system as “a set of things—people, cells, molecules, or whatever—interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time.” Studying parts of a systems (reductionism) helps us understand those parts, but not necessarily the whole system (or the “pattern of behavior over time”). Seeing the whole as an aggregate of parts strips the whole of its complexity, because the whole is in fact something more than the sum of its parts (McGilchrist 2021).

Any person engaged in singing is an example of a complex system. The act of singing involves the interaction of physiological, neurological, and psychological systems within an individual who is, in turn, embedded within highly complex socio-cultural systems. Rather than breaking down the act of singing into components (e.g. acoustic strategies, vocal fold behavior), fully qualitative approaches, particularly those which adopt a phenomenological stance, can help understand singing as a *gestalt*, or as something which cannot be understood simply as the sum of its parts. Similarly within complex systems, the term “emergence” refers to “the arising of something from the interaction of [a system’s] components that is larger than these fundamental parts” (Siegel and Drulis, 2023, 7). In other words, the experience of singing can be understood as a type of “emergent property” of a complex system.⁵ The challenge then becomes, how do we research this emergence or experience in ways that are both methodologically rigorous *and* relevant to practitioners?

Fully Qualitative Research By Singers, With Singers, For Singers

The following section discusses how undertaking fully qualitative research can provide voice researchers with a rigorous approach to tackling the complexity of the singing experience. It concludes with a discussion of some challenges researchers may face when adopting a fully qualitative approach and considers the indicators of quality for qualitative research.

It is timely to invoke Carla Willig’s (2013) metaphor for qualitative research as an “adventure.” Thinking of this style of research as an adventure encourages creativity, responsiveness, and improvisation. Willig (2013) contrasts “research as adventure” with more positivistic approaches which are likened to “research by recipe” where studies are designed and proceed in a more linear, step-by-step fashion. The embodied connotations of “research as adventure” might be particularly appealing to singers as researchers because the embodied voice is integral to the lived experience of identifying as a singer (Oakland, MacDonald, and Flowers 2012, Forbes, Goopy, and Krause 2023).

Methodologies and Methods

Fully qualitative research incorporates different methodologies and approaches, all informed by a qualitative sensibility (Willig 2013). Methodologies used in fully qualitative singing voice research include Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (e.g. Heyman, Perkins, and Araújo 2019, Oakland, MacDonald, and Flowers 2012, 2013, Oakland, MacDonald, and Flowers 2014), ethnography (Cox 2020, Cox 2024), and biographical methodologies such as life history (e.g. Waters 2023) (noting this list is not exhaustive). Reflexive thematic analysis is also positioned as fully qualitative, but lies somewhere between method and methodology, with Braun and Clarke (2021a, 4) describing it as “method-ish”: “a method, with a side of methodology” (e.g. Cox 2020, Forbes and Bartlett 2020).

The choice of methodology will depend on the research questions being asked (Braun and Clarke 2013). Singing voice researchers are encouraged to consider asking questions which lend themselves to a fully qualitative approach, that is, questions which seek to explore deeply the experiences of singers. By way of example, my IPA study of three professional jazz singers asked the research question: “How do professional jazz singers experience improvisation?” (Forbes 2021). This question was designed to understand what it was like for these singers when they improvised with the voice during performances, particularly when they felt improvisation “went well.” IPA of semi-structured interviews with the singers found their experiences exhibited the characteristics of the flow state during improvisation. Because research on jazz improvisation focuses almost exclusively on instrumentalists, and because singers are often perceived by their jazz colleagues as “under-achieving” improvisers (Hargreaves 2013), the finding that singers experienced flow during improvisation in the same way as instrumentalists provides evidence to counter negative perceptions of jazz singers’ skills and abilities as improvisers. Professional singers’ experiences are a valuable resource for researchers because these singers are often able to reflect deeply and articulately about their practice. In this sense, professional singers can be viewed as “key informants” (Marshall 1996) or “experts by experience” (Flock et al. 2023), that is, singing voice research participants who have highly valuable embodied knowledge of singing practice from which we can all undoubtedly learn more.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews are a common form of data collection within fully qualitative research. For example, in a series of studies on opera choristers’ experiences of redundancy, Oakland, MacDonald, and Flowers 2012, 2013) conducted semi-structured interviews with opera choristers, asking questions like “What does singing mean to you?”, “How did it feel when you realised redundancy was inevitable?”, “How did it feel on your first day without work?” and “What changes in your life have you seen since you stopped singing full-time?” (Oakland, MacDonald, and Flowers 2012, 138). Using IPA methodology, interview questions were crafted to elicit responses which conveyed how participants made sense of their redundancy. The embodiment of the voice was found to be a key factor within choristers’ experiences which required a reevaluation of singers’ identity after job loss.

Other methods of data collection commonly used within fully qualitative research include ethnographic methods such as participant observation and reflexive researcher diaries (e.g. Cox 2020, Cox 2024), and life history interviews. Waters (2023) used life history interviews to investigate professional dramatic sopranos' experiences of hormonal change. Evocatively titled "Brünnhilde Bleeds", Waters' study gathered in-depth and personal information from life history interviews with 13 professional singers. As a dramatic soprano herself, Waters used life history—which requires a process of negotiation and collaboration with participants—to gain insight into the embodied and psychological experiences of menopause for this elite cohort. The approach was justified due to the sensitive nature of the information being shared and the potential for this information to impact singers' reputations within the industry. Waters (2023, 14) includes discussion of her shared identity with participants, acknowledging it as central to the research process. This study, conducted by a singer with singers, has immense value for other singers, as it "brings to life" the challenges faced by professional singers experiencing menopause, serving as a different way to understand the phenomenon, beyond merely a physiological event (see also Bos, Bozeman, and Frazier-Neely 2020).

Data Analysis

The analytic procedures for qualitative data will differ depending on the chosen methodology, but fully qualitative research will inevitably involve interpretation of data by the researcher. As Roulston (2006, 161) explains, the concept of interpretation in qualitative research can be traced to the theoretical work of Max Weber and the German "Verstehen" which means understanding. The qualitative analyst seeks to understand and make meaning of the data, probing reflexively for how and why certain meanings are developing through the act of interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2021b, 2019, 289). Data analysis within a fully qualitative paradigm is not, however, a free-for-all; it must be guided by the research questions, with the aim being not to summarize the data, but to *interpret it* (Braun and Clarke 2013, Loc. 4913–4914). Within IPA, for example, analysts are encouraged to conduct a close reading of participants' accounts attending to convergence and divergence, "bringing to light that which lies at least partly hidden, making manifest that which is latent" (Nizza, Farr, and Smith 2021, 383). IPA researchers engage in a "double hermeneutic", interpreting the participant's interpretation of their own experience (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). Thus, within IPA, the analytic focus is "dual" in that it seeks to identify themes across the data set, but also attends to details in participants' accounts (Braun and Clarke 2020, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). The interpretation should be thorough, plausible, and "grounded in the data" (Braun and Clarke 2013, Loc. 587). By way of worked examples within singing voice research, readers are directed to the series of articles by Oakland, MacDonald, and Flowers (2012, 2013, 2014) on opera choristers' experiences of redundancy.

Each methodology invokes theory differently (Braun and Clarke 2020, Willig 2013). For example, due to its idiographic foundations, IPA largely eschews the use of theory to guide research questions and data interpretation (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). In keeping with this approach, Oakland et al's (2012, 2013, 2014) IPA studies use theoretical concepts from the literature to discuss findings rather than to guide the analysis. This approach ensures that the researchers adhere to IPA's idiographic commitment to stay

close to participants' experiences. By contrast, reflexive thematic analysis is "theoretically flexible", allowing theory to be invoked at different stages throughout the research process (Braun and Clarke 2021b, Braun and Clarke 2021a). For example, in a study of singers who facilitate singing groups for health and wellbeing, wellbeing theory was used to inform data analysis and interpretation (Forbes and Bartlett 2020). These examples demonstrate that in some methodologies, theory is invoked after analysis, and in others, theory can be used to guide the analytic process.

To gain depth of understanding, participant sample sizes are typically small in comparison to quantitative studies and may even be as small as a single subject. For example, because IPA is not only concerned with identifying themes but also with capturing the details of individual experience, it lends itself to single case studies (Eatough and Smith 2006). Oakland et al.'s (2014) IPA study explored the experiences of a singer, "Joe", who suffered career disruption due to physical disability. This single case study highlighted the distressing psychological impacts physical injury can have on a singer's vocal identity with clear implications for professional singers' career thinking and the ways in which music education might prepare graduates for career disruption.

The examples of singing voice research cited in this section all involve researchers who are singers themselves. Within fully qualitative analysis, the analyst's subjectivity is a tool which can be harnessed to give depth and nuance to interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2013, Braun and Clarke 2020, Braun and Clarke 2021a, Braun and Clarke 2021b). This is in stark contrast to most quantitative/positivistic research which requires the researcher to manage bias and remain objective (to the extent that that is actually possible—see Willig 2013).⁶ Reflexivity requires a high level of critical reflection, both on the ways our own values, beliefs, attitudes, social and cultural histories shape the research (personal reflexivity) and on how the research questions, research design, methodology, methods, and analysis "construct" the findings (epistemological reflexivity) (see Willig 2013, 10). Reflexive thematic analysis involves an inherent commitment to researcher reflexivity which is "a disciplined practice of critically interrogating what we do, how and why we do it, and the impacts and influences of this on our research" (Braun and Clarke 2021b, 5). What is crucial is that the researcher engage in both forms of reflexivity (personal and epistemological) and provide reasons—preferably weaved throughout the written account, if possible—for how subjectivity has influenced the conduct of the research (Braun and Clarke 2013, Braun and Clarke 2021b).

While subjectivity can be leveraged as a resource, reflexivity must be used to ensure our own position does not become a liability, restricting what we can see in the data (Braun and Clarke 2013, Loc. 4410). Some reflective prompts for singer-researchers are: What might I be missing in the data? What aspects of singing am I habitually drawn to? How might my personal history, values, beliefs, and attitudes toward singing influence my analysis? Is my personal experience of the embodiment of singing exerting undue influence on my analysis? Such questions provide reflexive harnesses for unbridled subjectivity in data analysis.

Some Challenges of Fully Qualitative Research

A lack of understanding among novice researchers (and even experienced ones) about different research paradigms can result in what has been called "confused" q qualitative

research (Hayfield quoted in Braun and Clarke 2021a, 329). “Confused q” qualitative is “research that seems to unknowingly, unreflexively and incoherently combine elements of qualitative positivism with the values and assumptions of a qualitative paradigm” (Braun and Clarke 2021a, 329). Like other voice professionals, singing voice researchers are increasingly seeking research qualifications yet may not have much formal research training (Oram 2015, Scott 2022, Winter 2021). This presents a challenge for supervisors or advisors who train doctoral candidates in research methodologies and methods. Singing voice researchers are advised to be aware of methodological debates and of the standards for quality qualitative research within their methodology of choice (see the online supplementary materials). Adhering to quality practices will significantly enhance the credibility of the evidence base.

Another caveat is that fully qualitative resource can be resource intensive and time consuming. Braun and Clarke (2013) warn that analysis will likely take twice as long as we estimate it will take! Fully qualitative data sets can be extensive, even where the sample size is small. Getting a handle on large data sets while adhering to quality criteria may not be an attractive proposition for time-pressed practitioners who are not paid for research, or for busy faculty with heavy teaching loads. The desire to uncover rich, deep findings about singing experience must be balanced with the practical realities many of us find ourselves in, where deep work is often buried under a mountain of minutiae and administrivia.

The time-consuming nature of the work then butts up against restrictions on reporting qualitative work, with most journals having limited word counts, presenting real challenges when seeking to adhere to quality indicators—it can be extremely challenging to tick all the “quality boxes” in 6,000 words or less! Oftentimes, the first casualty of a word limit will be sections which extensively detail researcher positionality and reflexivity practices. Weaving reflexive commentary throughout a research report at strategic points might go some way toward addressing this challenge.

Finally, ethical issues must be carefully considered for any research, but particularly when one may be researching participants as an insider,⁷ where there are existing social relationships and power dynamics at play (e.g. Cox 2020, 2024). Some of the more salient risks when undertaking insider research are risk to social/collegial relationships and risk to reputation. Institutional Review Board (IRB) (or ethical) approval to conduct the research will usually require the insider researcher to identify these risks and formulate an appropriate risk management plan.

Quality Indicators

Returning to the rigor-relevance discussion (Winter 2021), how can we ensure that taking a fully qualitative approach to singing voice research will produce quality research that is both rigorously conducted *and* relevant to practice? Roulston (2006, 157) reminds us that “[q]ualitative research design requires systematic, well-supported, and ethical choices at every step—in design, analysis, and interpretation.” Burnard (2006) cautions that qualitative research which neglects to fully attend to and report on the details of the approach taken will not progress the field. Markers of quality include (but are not limited to) clear alignment between research questions and design, philosophical assumptions (or research paradigm), methodology and methods, the use of existing theory to inform

design or explain findings, and where possible, adopting a reflexive voice in reporting findings (Braun and Clarke 2013, 2021b). There must be sufficient detail in a qualitative report for the reader to evaluate the credibility of the approach and, in the case of singing voice research, the transferability and relevance of findings to practice, industry, and music education. The online supplementary materials contain suggested readings for those wishing to explore in more detail the resources and literature available to guide the production of quality, qualitative research.

One of the best ways to produce quality research is to read quality research, but in a young field such as voice studies, locating plentiful examples may be challenging. For voice researchers to find examples of fully developed, theoretically-informed, qualitative research other than those offered in this article, it may be necessary to look further afield. The disciplines of education, nursing, management, and music education all have very well-developed literatures on the conduct of quality, fully qualitative research and are rich in examples of well-conducted and well-documented studies.

Conclusion

Fully qualitative research offers a different contribution to knowledge than quantitative studies (Braun and Clarke 2021b) which produce discrete packets of new knowledge about a specific phenomenon operating within a larger complex system (Fancourt et al. 2021). Fully qualitative research can weave new threads into a complex and ever-growing “rich tapestry of understanding” (Braun and Clarke 2021b, 6). To be relevant, research must speak to the audience for whom the problem being addressed is most salient. Sansom (2021) rightly encourages readers of *Voice and Speech Review* to ask the “So What” question after reading an article: How does this article add to the field, and how is the point of view unique? In anticipation of those questions, I would like to offer the following thoughts.

Within a field dominated by scientific research, fully qualitative research can provide rich new perspectives on experience by exploring the psychosocial and emotional dimensions of singing. It is not suggested that fully qualitative studies are better or more useful than scientific knowledge, but rather that they are complementary, allowing us to paint a fuller picture of what it means to sing. Fully qualitative studies can provide flesh and blood stories which bring objective phenomena to life. Waters’ (2023) life history study of opera singers’ experiences of menopause is an example of research which presents what it is like for professional singers to “live” a physiological process. The difficulties of speaking out within industry about the impact of hormonal changes on the voice is but one example of a highly relevant and important finding in Waters’ study and provides an illuminating complement to scientific understanding in this area.

More quality research on the singing experience is needed to better capture singing as a complex, culturally embedded, biopsychosocial act. Many professional and semiprofessional singers spend years honing and reflecting on their craft and have much to offer as members of a collaborative research team (Winter 2021), or as research participants who are key informants or experts by experience. Taking a fully qualitative approach means that the experiences of singers as researchers can be leveraged within research designs as a resource, rather than being considered a bias which must be managed. More quality qualitative research conducted by interdisciplinary collaborative teams including singers as researchers and participants is therefore to be welcomed.

Performing with the voice is an act of courage. It takes courage to go “the full Monty”, to fully reveal ourselves in performance, in research, and in life. Singers and voice performers are experts at revealing truths which are hidden to others. This article seeks to inspire voice practitioners to fully embrace qualitative research and to be familiar with the accepted standards of quality. To go “the full Monty” in qualitative research is to be reflexive and critical in getting to the very heart of things. Doing so will help build a robust and compelling evidence base for singing as a valuable and meaningful activity. This is especially urgent as we enter the age of generative artificial intelligence where machines are now capable of mimicking the human singing voice to an already uncanny degree. It is important for singing voice research to guide the practice and pedagogy of singing, and great strides have already been made in this regard. But it is equally vital that we build an evidence base drawing on fully qualitative research to help us understand—not just through intuition or anecdote—that singing is fundamental to who we are as human beings. If we as singing voice practitioners and researchers do not reveal this knowledge through robust methods and translate it for mainstream audiences, we run the risk of singing being relegated to a quaint legacy activity. Let it not come to that.

Notes

1. I use the term “singing voice research” to refer to published research which focuses on singing voice function, singing voice pedagogy, and the performance practices of singers, while acknowledging that the phrase could certainly refer to more than this. “Singing voice research” might also arguably include musicological studies or interdisciplinary research such as singing for health and wellbeing. However, these areas are beyond the scope of the current discussion.
2. It is also not uncommon for studies using thematic analysis to only cite Braun and Clarke’s foundational 2006 article (Braun and Clarke 2006) on the method without acknowledging the significant developments in this method since that time (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2016, Braun and Clarke 2019, Braun and Clarke 2020, Braun and Clarke 2021a, Braun and Clarke 2021b, Braun and Clarke 2022 to name a few!). It is highly recommended that researchers keep abreast of methodological developments if they are to produce quality research.
3. This is not to say that science has not impacted practice which would be an absurd claim. For example, even in the case of acoustic theory (one of the more arcane areas of voice science), Hoch notes, “these are basic concepts now understood by an increasing majority of singing teachers” (Hoch 2019, 52).
4. In conducting my search, I excluded some perceptual studies which were conducted within a quantitative paradigm, but whose research design included qualitative data, for example, perceptual evaluations of singing voice quality. As with survey data, the mere inclusion of words as data (by way of capturing a participant’s perceptions) does not make research qualitative.
5. See Camlin et al. (2020) on group singing as a complex adaptive system, and Fancourt et al. (2021) on understanding leisure activities as complex adaptive systems.
6. Willig (2013) explains how feminist critics of positivism have referred to the claim to strict objectivity as “The God Trick”, arguing we can never be fully removed from the object of study, and that our experiences will inevitably shape how we perceive it. It is suggested that the way to address this conundrum is through researcher reflexivity.
7. See Scott (2022) for a detailed discussion of ethical issues relevant to insider voice research.

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