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Pluralism in American Music Education Research: Essays and Narratives, a Review

George Nicholson
University of New Mexico, U.S.A.

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As a new researcher in the field of music education, two years into the start of the tenure process, I admit a sense of nervousness and apprehension regarding a blindness I perceive towards my future research trajectory. The “publish or perish” motif undergirds many music education doctoral programs, and at the core of that sentiment is the idea that to be successful in the field, a future scholar should continually be carving out a research agenda, with sights on a specific long-term project with a specialty methodology to achieve such ends. Towards the beginning of my degree, which I imagine to be similar to others, I was exposed to various methods and methodologies until I stumbled into my topic of choice, neoliberalism, and was guided towards a means of study that best fit this context. While I am proud of my work and my intellectual growth through the dissertation-research experience, I did not finish feeling like I had found “the one” - a particular agenda or methodology that I could claim as a passageway to tenure and beyond. I found myself applying to various conferences linked to various methodologies trying to find my “fit” within the professional research agenda. Most recently, I excitedly confirmed my acceptance to the Narrative Inquiry in Music Education (NiME) 8 conference, only to be sleepless at night while considering the reading and learning I had to sink into on yet another research methodology that I felt ill prepared to execute.

While preparing for NiME 8, I was asked to write a review of *Pluralism in American Music Education Research: Essays and Narratives*, an edited book by Dansereau and Dorfman. Pluralism is characterized by “an openness, an embracing perspective that values multiple lines of inquiry, approaches, frameworks, methods, and analytical techniques as equally important and likewise capable of contributing to bodies of knowledge... pluralism is about the people” (pp. 2-3). As such, the book consists of chapters written by various researchers within the field, purposely from a variety of personal and professional backgrounds. These authors are wise to carefully tease out the difference between method and methodology, allowing the readers to see this text not as a how-to guide on mixed methods, but as a philosophical turn in approaches to research. This philosophical turn looks in the direction of a postmodern glance, as Dorfman asserts, “a pluralistic approach to music education... includes acknowledgement that no one particular way of formulating or conducting research, or drawing conclusions based on research, can or should provide complete answers to research inquiries” (p. 147). It is only within the multiplicities of research methods towards study, the book suggests, that a field can begin to see the boundless landscapes of an issue. The purpose of this edited volume is to “encourage conversation and exchange of ideas among people in the music education research community around the value of varied approaches to our work” (p. 7). As such, “pluralism is an ongoing effort, rather than a standard that can be met and left behind” (p. 81). Niknafs explains that this approach considers “emergent methods, but also emergent research problems that cause the emergent and innovative methods” (p. 128). As such, pluralism makes room for open forms of research

and, perhaps more interestingly, open forms of researcher, including those like me who are not married to a singular agenda.

The book is divided in two; the opening half is comprised of essays, while the later consists of narratives of researchers within the field. The tone of the essays is set by two views of the historical context of music education research. As histories vary depending upon perspective, I appreciate that West and Conkling present intertwining yet contrasting perspectives that situate an appropriate shift to a new paradigm within the contemporary landscape of music education research. West positions the field with the larger paradigm struggle between objective, positivist research lenses and more subjective, interpretive research methods. He describes the ways in which the “science” wars have politicized the nature of research, a value-laden battle over which is the “right” method. While carefully noting the pitfalls of both sides, in the tension of quantitative thinking within a postmodern world and how qualitative methods must wrestle with notions of truth and legitimacy, the chapter concludes with how these dichotomous methods can provide methodological strength within the spaces of their intersections. Conkling tells a different history of research from a philosophical point of view, through the competing influences of Thorndike and Dewey on music education research. She argued that Thorndike “won,” resulting in a view of research methods that prioritize psychological over philosophical ends, resulting in “an adherence to the ideas of objectivity, generalizability, and prediction” (p. 32). She then mused on how research would look if Dewey’s method prevailed, and the potential result of “practice-in-context” (p. 36) research, a process that is born of the individual researcher’s questions and intrigues from their lived experiences as teachers and refined through reflective theorizing. Through her argument, Conkling provides a thorough practical connection to higher education research courses, which could be helpful to professors teaching such a class. She ends by pointing to the tension in seeing research as a set of procedures as opposed to a mode of inquiry, one that is more malleable to positionality and temporality.

The following six essays interrogate deeper crevices of research landscape within a pluralistic paradigm. Thornton writes on the nature of the research question at hand, noting the ways in which it interacts with a researcher’s passion, the tensions within the field at large, and notions of quality projects, ultimately suggesting that pluralistic methods can alleviate these concerns while also furthering their impact. I appreciate her suggestion that newer and blended research methods could provide a space that alleviates the teacher-researcher divide within ourselves and amongst the field of music teaching at large, through its multiple and transparent ends of connecting theory to practice. Dansereau then discusses the roots of pluralism within religion, paying particular attention to the influence cultural place has on overarching research aims and means. Dividing philosophical thought into four regions (north, east, south, and west), she discusses the process of undergoing a study, while pairing each

with a vivid example of recent music education research. Ultimately, Dansereau claims that all research, while different in intention, results in meaningful implications for social transformation. While we may find ourselves rooted within one region of thought—I, for one, see my studies through the Western lens “aimed at illuminating and criticizing the structures that shape our economic and social realities” (p. 91)—researchers can seek to expand their studies by exploring and including the philosophies from other worldly points of view.

Myers’s essay details the complexity of studies on the discipline of music (and its application within teaching and learning) to legitimize pluralistic research means. He states, “the applications of pluralistic methods can be limiting if they seek only to understand what is, rather than what is possible” (p. 99). Further, he argues that innovative pluralistic research methods could be a way to push back against neoliberal research and educational influences (both of which are issues discussed in West’s essay). Like Dansereau, Myers uses helpful practical examples of research to bring his argument to life. Niknafs offers a compelling essay on the personal nature of research identity and lens, through which lived experiences and language impart a set of values that identify and legitimize the subjectivity of research, ultimately showing that pluralism in research leads towards equitable ends for the profession as a whole. Dorfman then discusses the role of technology in research methods, and its ability to push us into new paradigms, while warning that it may also get in the way. He suggests, “in efforts to embrace pluralistic approaches to music education research, we risk producing work that does not necessarily meet conventional expectations of publishers and readers, but our desire to progress may outweigh the compulsion to conform” (p. 146). The essays conclude with Woody’s point of view from a quantitative research standpoint, arguing that while a researcher can stand within one paradigm, blurred lines between methodological underpinnings (in particular, the presence of the self within the research) can be utilized to strengthen work in any domain.

The second section of the book features narrative stories from researchers who have explored beyond their initial research trajectories and highlight the strength in the subjectivities of research. Talbot describes how viewing “diversity within diversity” (p. 181), particularly through language construction, has created porous landscapes of thought that have personally impacted his ability to research through various arts. Dansereau points to how the tidiness of a research project can effectively omit the frustrations that happen within the process, and articulates how highlighting this nonlinearity could lead towards new ways of research practice. Mantie details his uncertainty of objective reality through questioning notions of truth and power, and argues how a strong adherence to “methods” can restrict a researcher’s ability to recognize their subjectivities. Fitzpatrick documents her growing pains of pursuing a mixed method approach through an effort to resist a simplistic rendering of music teaching in Chicago’s city schools. Mozeiko and Rummel’s co-narrative is a glimpse into the doctoral

student's process of research and support through the dissertation process, which is helpful for both graduate students and faculty alike. The final two narratives by West and Dorfman show the connection of research interest to self-growth which, while particular to their experiences and areas of expertise, can be extracted towards any professional journey and specialty. The narratives, while smaller in scale to the essays, are powerful in how they underscore the connection of the research to the humans behind the work.

Pluralism in American Music Education Research: Essays and Narratives is useful for researchers in the field as well as those who teach research method courses within institutions. First, because this book comprises chapters written by major players within the field, the writing is varied, yet compelling. While the book itself presents a holistic picture of pluralistic approaches to research practice in music education, each chapter can also serve as a standalone work. Conkling's and Thornton's essays could serve teacher educators in their efforts to provide future researchers assistance in finding their niche in an organic, student-centered way. Most chapters employ explicit research examples, which serve well the connection of theory to practice. In sum, I find this text to be a mirror of the larger professional values that appear to be continually shifting towards social justice ends. If striving towards inclusivity, pluralistic methods can foster a research agenda which accepts that "multiple perspectives, multiple approaches, multiple types of findings, and multiple types of contributions to the body of knowledge... are valuable for learning" (p. 2).

Throughout the essays and narratives, the reader can sense an optimism towards the broad possibilities of a future filled with pluralistic research. However, I also take in the many tensions that arise when the implementation of such methodologies meets the current landscape of music education research. At the core is an issue of legitimacy and the relationship of new kinds of quality work to the high level of standards within the profession. Thornton's essay narrates how the tenure system and acceptance within the field at large can cause a crisis of identity between a part of the researcher whose livelihood necessitates publications and conference acceptances and a part of the researcher whose identity fundamentally morphs and grows through the process of researching. Through all the voices within the book, the messiness of research in a postmodern world is highlighted. Within the chapters are contradictions, including whether we are moving beyond or still enmeshed in the 'paradigm wars,' and resonations, like the importance and procedure of the question of method/methodologies. The goal of pluralism being a "two-way street" exists within a theoretical roadmap where we can never truly know each other and each other's point of view. The tension created by pluralistic methods can leave a researcher unsure of what is acceptable and what is not. As Dorfman states, the field of research in music education "still recognize an *either-or* existence of methods rather than a *both-and* approach" (p. 162).

But through these tensions, this book articulates and demonstrates a way forward, or perhaps a way to live within the tension, by illuminating the need to recognize the personal nature of research, both within the process and the writing itself. As such, one key feature of the text is the intimate and vulnerable anecdotes found throughout many chapters. In particular, I found Thornton's and Niknafs's voices to be profoundly personal—not only showing the strength of research when connected to the writer, but also through the innovative blending of styles, methods, and writing. Niknafs notes how the personal nature of research identity and lens, through lived experiences and language, can impart a set of values that identify and can legitimize the subjectivity of research. Thornton brings to life her ideas through the power of personal stories of researchers who found their agenda through their own passion of lived experiences. At large, this edited book showcases the humanistic fascia between science and research, the people who compose of the data, and the reader. As such, this text makes room for humanism within a postmodern paradigm. Recalling the characterization in the introduction to the approach, that “pluralism is about the people” (p. 3), this is a book about methods that places methods secondary to the researcher. I found that this personal approach to research and to the text itself helps “resist the idea that pluralism waters down a particular research tradition” (p. 81).

The book as a whole argues well that pluralistic research fits into a contemporary postmodern view of the world. As Niknafs notes, “one cannot truly grasp the complex and multilayered experiences of being in the world today” (p. 128). Leaning into this sentiment, I can find comfort in the messiness that makes for new and exciting research, and can begin to resist my worries about having a specific niche of study ahead. She continues, “rather than considering this plurality an impediment, one should bear it in mind as an opportunity that opens up a variety of understandings, room for further exploration, space for problem finding, and ever-new research questions” (p. 129). This book helped me see that categories of research are not as rigid as I had thought, as these categories are fluid and dynamic, based on temporally based philosophies and policies. I still leave this book concerned with the *how*. West questions whether one researcher is capable of plurality, or instead if we should zoom out to work towards methodological plurality within the field at large. I hope that we can find room for both scenarios. As I finished this book while attending the NiME 8 conference, I saw a profession striving for this very philosophical stance—a variety of presentations that both expanded methodologies and creative arts-based interpretations of data—and left with inspiration to find new paths ahead.

About the Author

George Nicholson is the Assistant Professor of Music Education and Director of String Pedagogy at the University of New Mexico. He holds degrees from the University of Miami, University of Georgia-Athens, and Teachers College Columbia University. His research

interests revolve around the connection of educational theories to pedagogical practices in the domains of policy, equity, and creativity.

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