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INTRODUCTION



Welcome to exploring the ways in which mindfulness can enhance the role of the researcher in qualitative inquiry. Many qualitative method texts discuss honing self-reflexivity or bracketing preexisting knowledge. However, limited texts provide a tool to exercising reflexivity or identifying biases. In addition, the following chapters provide suggestions to overcoming issues that may present themselves in the field. Therefore, this book will help all qualitative researchers, both novice and experienced, learn how to engage with the present moment and practice mindfulness to enhance our role in qualitative inquiry, adding a pivotal tool to the methodological toolbox.

Ultimately, this book is about creating space. When intentionally generating silence, we are able to cultivate space between thoughts. More often than not, our lives are filled with noise. This is especially true for the research setting, where knowledge, data, and deadlines may overload our minds. Even when we leave the research setting, very rarely are we cultivating quiet in our lives. Time is spent on the phone, using social media, and watching TV, where continuous sounds take up most of the space. Little time is spent cultivating silence because it is often associated with nothingness or a mind dump. However, value exists in cultivating silence. Take, for example, a bird.

The only way a bird will come to an open window is if there is silence. The same philosophy can be applied to our research insights. We cannot create rich insights from data unless we are able to cultivate silence throughout the entire research process.

When we pause and start to recognize the chaos in our environment, silence becomes a source of calm, insight, and focus. Silence helps heighten the senses and increase awareness. When we engage in cultivating intentional silence, we are able to create space. Space leads to an acute attention to thoughts, senses, emotions, sensations, and intensions that may be missed when our mind is filled with noise. The space created from silence leads to further connection with the self. For example, a bowl does not become a bowl until space has been removed for it to fill. A window does not become a window until space has been created to let the light shine in. Similarly, research skills are honed and enhanced when space is created in the mind. A few moments of silence can grow and deepen contemplation, help us turn inward, and focus our attention, which ultimately creates more space in our mind. Silence creates room for us to deepen our connection to ourselves and those around us, which enhances our research abilities. Let us take a deeper dive into better understanding mindfulness.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Defining Mindfulness. In the most basic explanation, mindfulness is an awareness that occurs from paying attention on purpose. Kabat-Zinn (2003) defined mindfulness as “an awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and practicing non-judgment of the experience throughout each moment” (p. 145). Mindfulness is characterized by a nonjudgmental awareness that creates a special kind of attention rooted in openness and curiosity. When we exercise this level of attention, the result is a profound acceptance of *all* experiences, both internal and external (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). Through the practice of meditation, the focus is on developing our ability to exercise a nonjudgmental awareness and welcoming of all experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Over time, when we exercise this special kind of attention we begin to avoid acting impulsively and instead operate from a thoughtful and intentional place (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009).

The Systemic Approach. Beyond honing the skill to pay attention on purpose, mindfulness occurs through body awareness, where emotions

are regulated to the extent that certain emotional responses are avoided, and perspectives of the self adjust, which cultivates a higher level of self-acceptance (Hozel et al., 2011). Shapiro and Schwartz (2000) provided the Intentional Systemic Mindfulness (ISM) model, which serves as the theoretical construct to elucidate the interrelatedness of self-regulation, attitude, and the intention that occurs when practicing mindfulness. The mindfulness experience does not follow a linear process; rather, it encompasses the constant ebb and flow of expanding and redefining the initial intention behind the practice. Mindfulness is cultivated through the interconnectivity between the experiences of self-regulation, attitude, and intention. Specifically, Shapiro and Schwartz (2002) explained that self-regulation, or the role of attention, is the process through which the system maintains the stability to function while incorporating flexibility and the capacity for change in new situations. When we function with flexibility, the capacity for change leads to self-regulation. The end result is order and health across the entire system or person.

In using this systemic perspective, self-regulation recognizes the interrelatedness of all things. This leads to the intention of accepting and healing each piece of the system, while simultaneously restoring the larger whole. To heal the system, the individual must employ an attitude grounded in the mindfulness qualities to enable self-regulation (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2002). Mindfulness qualities include letting go, openness, patience, acceptance, nonstriving, trust, and nonjudgment. These attitudes lead to the development of regulated emotional responses like loving-kindness, gratitude, empathy, generosity, and gentleness. The ISM approach illustrates that the mindfulness practice is more than simply paying attention; what is most important is the intention behind the attention regulation that results from mindful practices.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

To develop mindfulness, one must participate in programs like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, which systematically uses mindful attention to cultivate aspects of the mind and heart (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The MBSR program helps people develop mindfulness, by making one radically aware of the present moment, accepting the moment as it is without becoming caught up in the emotions and thoughts that may arise within the experience (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005). The MBSR program teaches three different practices: the body scan, which includes a slow-moving attention across the body from head to feet, concentrating on any sensation or feeling that may occur in the body; sitting meditation,

where the focus is on the breath and a state of nonjudgmental awareness as thoughts and distractions continually arise in the mind and in the space; and a Hatha yoga practice, which incorporates simple stretches and breathing exercises (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009).

Aligning with the ISM approach, I believe mindfulness is more than a yoga or meditation practice. Mindfulness is about a profound acceptance, where all states of mind are embraced, without striving for or favoring one state of mind over the other and embracing whatever is occurring in the present moment because it is already happening (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). The mindfulness practice is a way of being. It is about exercising an intention to pay attention on purpose, relying on the attitudes that underpin mindfulness, and simply experiencing the present moment just as it is.

THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCHER

When inquiry is rooted in the participants' experiences, where those experiences develop insights, the researcher is conducting qualitative research. Qualitative researchers focus on how people experience their own natural environment and how they give meaning to that experience (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). Inquiries from a qualitative tradition are defined by four main characteristics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, data collection is about focusing on and understanding meaning from the participants' lived experience. Second, the process is inductive, where the data gathered is used to build concepts, theories, hypotheses. Third, the findings include rich descriptions, where words are used for data collection instead of numbers. The goal is to not quantify but to explain. The fourth, and most important for this text, is that the researcher is the primary instrument.

There are advantages to the researcher being the instrument, such as processing information immediately and asking participants to clarify information while engaging in data collection. However, issues do arise when the researcher is the instrument. Specifically, all researchers arrive with personal biases, existing information, and preconceived notions about the research setting. While these are human nature, since our previous experiences shape who we are, working to deal with personal biases and preexisting knowledge is an important process for any qualitative researcher. This highly personal process helps ensure trustworthiness throughout the entire research investigation.

To be a proficient qualitative researcher, we must participate in training. Training can come in the form of traditional coursework, special conference sessions, or reading texts focused on methods. While engaging with

these various trainings, the researcher can become more reliable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since the researcher is both the data collection and data analysis instrument, training to hone the skills that reinforce this experience is necessary. Specifically, how can a researcher train to be more present, welcome ambiguity, exercise curiosity, increase awareness, and practice empathy to respond accordingly to whatever may occur in the research setting? The answer is to develop a research-based mindfulness practice, which is the focus for this book.

When qualitative researchers incorporate mindfulness, we are motivated by acute curiosity and open-mindedness about whatever the research setting and the participant(s) bring up. In addition, we remain engaged and present in the research process despite preexisting knowledge, thoughts, and habits that may detract from the present moment (Stetler, 2010). Such practice would help the bricoleur augment crystallization, which “requires patience and zen-like contemplation” (Stewart, Gapp, & Harwood, 2017, p. 13). We would also exercise a deep empathy while interacting and sharing the research setting with participants. The next section further explicates the connection between a mindfulness practice and the qualitative researcher.

THE MINDFUL QUALITATIVE RESEARCHER

Life as a researcher is often characterized by strict deadlines and information overload, where decisions are pragmatically made to meet job requirements and goals. However, to value every step of the research process, qualitative researchers must prioritize and carve out thinking time to safeguard thought processes (Keegan, 2012). The only way to do this is to turn off the technology, explore nature, and invite in all aspects of the human experience, which leads to a commitment to exist and live in the present moment. This way of life has great potential to make a difference in our lives, our participants’ lives, and the research community as a whole (Lemon, 2017). We can then be liberated from limiting thoughts to refine our minds and our potential for seeing and knowing (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Mindfulness is an invitation to get to know ourselves better through each present moment (2005).

At the foundation, mindfulness is rooted in rich inquiry and the finesse of insights (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), which means a natural connection exists between the qualitative researcher and mindfulness. As mentioned previously, qualitative research is focused on locating the researcher *inside* the participants’ world, where the goal of data collection is to capture the participants’ point of view and lived experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Although not openly discussed in extant literature (e.g., Brummans, 2014),

qualitative researchers could benefit from incorporating mindfulness into data collection and analysis since the practice is about being in the present moment and paying attention on purpose. Most importantly, this skill would eradicate the researcher moving through the research setting on autopilot with an undisciplined mind, which could result in the researcher's mind becoming an unreliable tool (Hart et al., 2013). In the end, you will transition into being a mindful qualitative researcher.

The Benefits. From a broad perspective, the mindfulness practice offers three advantages. First, mindfulness can assist with the researcher and participant relationship. The researcher and participant are fused into a single reality, where knowledge emerges from this unique exchange (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2013); ultimately, the researcher and the participant are inextricably connected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The mindfulness practice strengthens this intentional relationship between the researcher and the participant and enhances the researcher's curiosity, openness, and awareness that facilitate the research process. Cultivating awareness through mindfulness removes the dualistic relationship of researcher versus participant and encourages an intentional relationship where both are engaging in the co-creation of data, which is one of the unique strengths of qualitative research (Brummans, 2014).

Second, mindfulness can be used to support the notion of the emergent research design and can help researchers exercise flexibility while in the research setting (Lemon, 2017). The mindfulness practice helps the researcher embrace the idea that the phenomenon can and should emerge on its own without controlling the process, where the goal is to adopt and welcome an emergent design. The concept of the emergent design encourages the researcher to navigate whatever presents itself in the field and to let things simply occur, instead of forcing and imposing predetermined assumptions and meanings onto the research setting. A skilled qualitative researcher is competent in dealing with ambiguity and carefully observing in the midst of uncertainty (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Yin (2014) offered that a skilled researcher will adapt to the research setting and avoid biases when possible. Mindfulness entails a unique openness to all events or situations because the practice reminds us that everyday life is constantly changing; this prevents the predetermination.

Third, mindfulness can help hone self-reflexivity. Important note: Mindfulness and self-reflexivity are not one and the same; rather, mindfulness can enrich our abilities to exercise reflexivity. Self-reflexivity is about researchers recognizing their position within the participants' world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In employing self-reflexivity, the researcher explains existing biases, knowledge, and assumptions regarding the research

investigation. The mindfulness practice is actually greater than self-reflexivity because the practice encourages the practitioner to become extremely aware of the *full* experience, which is occurring in the present moment, moving beyond the bank of preexisting knowledge. This would lead researchers who practice mindfulness to recognize the many ways in which we often edit our experiences in addition to the biases and assumptions. When experiences are edited, we misrepresent the present moment by relying on routine and habitual behaviors that estrange our current experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Incorporating mindfulness as a tool for qualitative researchers could potentially lessen habitual thought processes, providing an opportunity to attend to more subtle thoughts that would ordinarily be ignored (Buttle, 2013). The end result is potentially more nuanced and richer findings from data collection and analysis.

LEARNING HOW TO MINDFULLY MEMO

Before concluding, let's discuss a unique component of each chapter in this book: the *Mindful Memos*. *Mindful Memos* are a journaling aspect that encourage a deeper connection to the physical meditation practices in this book. The purpose of the *Mindful Memos* is to see how your mind shifts and changes over the course of each 2-week practice. These changes may be very subtle, so without the memos, any nuance of the experiences may be missed.

After learning a new meditation practice, you will be asked to memo about your experiences. The following questions can be used to guide what you write in the *Mindful Memos*. But remember these questions are just a guide to get you started. I encourage you to explore other questions that fit best with your experience.

- How did you feel before the meditation, throughout, and then after?
- What unique physical sensations did you have throughout the meditation?
- Did you experience any physical pain? Where did you experience that pain?
- Was your mind drawn to the same thought or previous experience over and over? What was that thought?
- Did you find yourself planning, making lists, or ruminating about the past?

- What changes are you seeing in your thought processes because of your new meditation practice?
- Anything unique, interesting, or important stand out to you regarding your experience?

As mentioned, these are questions to initiate what you might capture in the *Mindful Memos*. Feel free to write just a few notes or more, depending on what you feel most comfortable with at the time. However, the *Mindful Memos* should be captured after each meditation practice. The *Mindful Memos* should also be reviewed following the 2-week practice. In doing so, the change that is fundamental to having a consistent meditation practice will be witnessed.

CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an overview of the book in addition to the mindfulness practice, setting the stage for what to expect in the following pages. Connections were made between mindfulness and qualitative research to demonstrate how this practice can benefit researchers at various stages in their careers.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Ultimately, this book is about creating space to enhance and improve qualitative research. When intentionally generating silence, we cultivate space between thoughts. Silence creates room for us to deepen our connection to ourselves and those around us, which enhances our research abilities.
- Mindfulness is an awareness that occurs from paying attention on purpose. When qualitative researchers incorporate mindfulness, we are motivated by acute curiosity and open-mindedness about whatever the research setting and the participant(s) bring up.
- This book serves as a training guide to increase our reliability as research instruments and to dive deeper into how mindfulness fits with various aspects of qualitative inquiry. Each chapter of this book presents a qualitative method along with a mindfulness practice that stems from the MBSR philosophy and training.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Have you heard of “mindfulness” prior to reading this chapter? What are your initial impressions of mindfulness?
- What concerns do you have about pursuing a mindfulness practice?
- What barriers might you face while pursuing the mindfulness practices presented in this book? How might you overcome those barriers?
- What do you think about the *Mindful Memos*? How will you incorporate this component into your meditation practice?

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