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Applying a Mindfulness Practice to Qualitative Data Collection

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Abstract

Mindfulness, or paying attention on purpose in the present moment, can serve as a tool for qualitative researchers as they navigate the research setting and data collection. In this article, I provide an overview of mindfulness and suggest ways to incorporate mindfulness as a data collection tool. To demonstrate how to apply mindfulness to qualitative research, I share my personal experience in incorporating a mindfulness practice into data collection as part of a phenomenological study and what I learned in the process. In doing so, I offer an actual practice that researchers can incorporate into the research process as a means to attune them to the present moment to deepen self-reflexivity and enhance trustworthiness.

Keywords

Mindfulness, Qualitative Research, Methodologies, Data Collection

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Applying a Mindfulness Practice to Qualitative Data Collection

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Mindfulness, or paying attention on purpose in the present moment, can serve as a tool for qualitative researchers as they navigate the research setting and data collection. In this article, I provide an overview of mindfulness and suggest ways to incorporate mindfulness as a data collection tool. To demonstrate how to apply mindfulness to qualitative research, I share my personal experience in incorporating a mindfulness practice into data collection as part of a phenomenological study and what I learned in the process. In doing so, I offer an actual practice that researchers can incorporate into the research process as a means to attune them to the present moment to deepen self-reflexivity and enhance trustworthiness. Keywords: Mindfulness, Qualitative Research, Methodologies, Data Collection

Introduction

"When we touch beneath all the busyness of thought, we discover a sweet, healing silence, an inherent peacefulness in each of us, a goodness of heart, strength, and wholeness that is our birthright." –Jack Kornfield

The practice of mindfulness can be found in many places in contemporary society including smart phone apps, classes or groups, and is often featured in traditional media outlets. Mindfulness has been touted to help practitioners eliminate stress and anxiety, and to be more present in everyday life. Mindfulness, or paying attention on purpose in the present moment, has a place in research too and can serve as a tool for qualitative researchers as they navigate the research setting and the data collection process. Specifically, mindfulness provides an opportunity for the researcher to tap into greater self-reflexivity, which is important since "reflexivity is the heartbeat of a qualitative research project" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 72).

In this paper, I provide an overview of the mindfulness practice and relevant research to demonstrate the changes practitioners may experience while participating in mindfulness interventions. In addition, I propose that mindfulness is an ideal tool for qualitative research, specifically in data collection. To demonstrate how to apply mindfulness to qualitative research, I will share my personal experience in incorporating mindfulness into data collection as part of my recent phenomenological study and what I learned in the process. In doing so, I offer an actual practice that researchers can incorporate into the research process as a means to attune them to the present moment to deepen self-reflexivity and enhance trustworthiness.

What Is Mindfulness?

At the core of mindfulness is a heightened awareness that is the result from paying attention on purpose. Kabat-Zinn (2003) defines 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 a special kind of attention that is characterized by a nonjudgmental awareness that fosters openness and curiosity. And in doing so, one experiences a radical acceptance of both internal and external present experiences (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). Mindfulness training focuses on developing an individual's ability to exercise nonjudgmental awareness and acceptance of all experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Over time, this special kind of attention helps individuals avoid acting impulsively and instead, more thoughtfully (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). One important note is that Kabat-Zinn's notion of mindfulness is different than Langer (1989), a social-psychologist who studied mindfulness approaches in organizations and whose work has been linked with high-reliability organizations (Hart, Ivztan, & Hart, 2013). Langer (1989) focuses only on external stimuli and sees mindfulness as a fleeting state of mind supported by self-regulation and being open, while Kabat-Zinn (2003) views mindfulness as a long-term, developed trait.

In addition to an active paying attention on purpose, mindfulness can also occur through body awareness, emotional regulation like refraining from certain emotional responses, and changing the perspective of the self, which results in an enhanced self-acceptance (Hozel et al., 2011). Shapiro and Schwartz (2000) introduced Intentional Systemic Mindfulness (ISM) as a theoretical construct to explain the interrelatedness of self-regulation, attitude, and the intention behind practicing mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness is not a linear process and involves the constant expanding and redefining of the initial intention. Mindfulness is not an end in itself but rather is cultivated through the interconnectedness between self-regulation, attitude, and intention. Shapiro and Schwartz (2000) discuss how self-regulation, or attuning to the present moment, is the process through which the system maintains the stability to function while incorporating flexibility and the capacity for change in new situations. When individuals function with flexibility and demonstrate a capacity for change, this leads to self-regulation and ultimately order across the whole system.

From a systems perspective, self-regulation involves seeing and recognizing the interrelatedness of all things. This results in an intention to acknowledge and heal each piece of the system, while simultaneously healing the larger whole. In addition, the individual must exercise an attitude grounded in mindfulness qualities to facilitate self-regulation (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2000). The mindfulness qualities include non-striving, non-judging, acceptance, patience, trust, openness and letting go, which leads to the development of affective qualities like gratitude, gentleness, generosity, empathy and loving-kindness. The ISM approach helps articulate that mindfulness is more than simply paying attention, but that the intention behind the attention regulation associated with mindfulness is what is most important.

The process of developing mindfulness is based on highly refined programs like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which systematically trains and cultivates aspects of the mind and heart through mindful focusing of the attention (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The goal of the MBSR program is to develop mindfulness, making one highly aware of the present moment, accepting the moment just as it is without getting caught up in the thoughts or emotions about the experience (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005). MBSR includes three different techniques: the body scan, which involves a gradual movement of attention of the body from head to feet focusing on any sensation or feeling in the body; sitting meditation, which involves both attention on the breath and a state of nonjudgmental awareness of the thoughts and distractions that continually arise in the mind; and Hatha yoga practice, which includes breathing exercises and simple stretches (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). In practicing meditation and other awareness techniques, a meta-awareness of and an increased attunement to the present moment develop (Fielden, 2012).

However, just because one practices yoga or meditates does not mean he or she is going to be mindful or experiencing mindfulness. Mindfulness requires a profound acceptance, in which the person embraces all states of the mind, without favoring one mind state over the other, and accepting whatever is happening simply because it is already happening (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Therefore, practicing mindfulness is a way of being, in which an individual is intentional about paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and relies on the mindfulness qualities or attitudes to guide the experience.

Previous Mindfulness Research

Below is an overview of some of the outcomes of mindfulness interventions like the MBSR program. The evidence below speaks for itself, demonstrating the impact of mindfulness practices and how it may positively influence the practitioner. This section helps set the stage for why we as qualitative researchers may be interested in such practices.

Quantitative research has dominated most of the mindfulness research, with studies using content analyses, experiments and surveys to assess mindfulness and its outcomes (Baer, 2003; Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Hozel et al., 2011). Most of the research has focused on people dealing with various health issues or people working in the health care industry. Overall, MBSR programs were found to decrease rumination, anxiety, and stress, while enhancing empathy and self-compassion (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009), which can lead to individuals taking better care of themselves and experiencing self-perspective changes (Hozel et al., 2011). Additionally, mindfulness reduces emotional reactivity to pain and helps with self-management, cognitive change, and acceptance (Baer, 2003). For the studies that do focus on healthy people, MBSR programs mostly impact stress-levels with moderate effects on anxiety, depression, and distress, which leads to an improved quality of life (Khoury, Sharma, Rush, & Fournier, 2015). Additionally, mindfulness can lead to cognitive flexibility, being able to see different viewpoints, which leads to a decrease in dogmatic thought processes (Martin, Staggers, & Anderson, 2011).

Using experiments to examine mindfulness has arguably generated some of the most innovative ways to examine a concept that is not easily measured. In one study, participants completed affect labeling tasks while undergoing an MRI, and concluded that mindfulness increased participants' ability to view expressions of affect as an object versus having a response or labeling the affect. This finding demonstrates that meditation allows individuals to disengage from having a reaction (Creswell, Way, Eisenberger, & Lieberman, 2007). Researchers in another study created a quasi-experiment, using a computerized human visual system and found that the subjective now is longer for meditators than non-meditators, and the subjective now is active in situations of demand when intentionality is incorporated (Sauer et al., 2012). Jha, Krompinger, and Baime (2007) used behavioral testing with an attention network test and found that different techniques from the eight-week MBSR program (e.g., body scan, yoga, and meditation) have different affects with the intensive retreat having a major impact; retreat participants demonstrated better conflict monitoring than non-meditating participants.

Additional studies have demonstrated several outcomes for mindfulness practices, building a substantial body of knowledge to support the influence of mindfulness (e.g., Baer, Carmody, & Hunsinger, 2012; Birnie, Speca, & Carlson, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2005). For example, in a randomized control pilot study, MBSR was found to decrease overall psychological distress, stress and job burnout, which resulted in an increase in self-compassion (Shapiro et al., 2005). Birnie, Speca, and Carlson (2010) used self-reports and found that mindfulness is a pre-condition for self-compassion, and the results showed an increase in perspective taking as an aspect of empathy. Baer, Carmody, and Hunsinger (2012) conducted a longitudinal experiment and found that a change in perceived mindfulness resulted in an overall improvement in life and health, and concluded that it is not how much meditation one does, but rather how well the meditation is done is what makes a difference.

In providing this brief literature review of previous mindfulness studies, I demonstrate the affects one may experience by practicing mindfulness techniques or interventions over time. Thus, the aforementioned researchers demonstrate how powerful the practice can be in changing and shaping practitioners' minds by decreasing stress, anxiety, rumination, and

dogmatic thought processes, which can lead to more cognitive flexibility, empathy and self-compassion.

Mindfulness as a Tool for Qualitative Researchers

Although mindfulness research has predominantly been executed in medical contexts, benefits for and applications of mindfulness expand beyond the clinical setting. Mindfulness has a part in rich inquiry and the refinement of insights (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), and therefore, has the potential to influence the process of research, specifically qualitative research. Fielden (2012) suggests that mindfulness is essential for qualitative researchers who investigate information systems, but I think it is applicable to all qualitative scholars and their areas of interest.

In qualitative research, the researcher is located inside the participants' world, not outside, and data collection practices are used to capture the participants' point of view (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Nagata (2002) suggests that the "quality of qualitative research is fundamentally determined by the quality of the consciousness of the researcher, who has a responsibility to commit to a process of continual self-reflection" (p. 33). Although not clearly articulated in existing literature (Brummans, 2014), qualitative research could benefit from incorporating mindfulness interventions as a tool for data collection and analysis by actively paying attention on purpose, in the present moment. This approach would eliminate the researcher operating in an autopilot state with an undisciplined mind, which could lead to the researcher's mind becoming an unreliable instrument (Hart et al., 2013). In addition, mindfulness would enhance the awareness of both the self and lived experiences and the interplay between the two, which can lead to self-refinement (Nagata, 2002).

It is important to note that mindfulness is different than being self-reflexive. Although mindfulness can enrich self-reflexivity, the practice is something greater, in which the practitioner is dutifully aware of the full spectrum of the present experience. In doing so, researchers who practice mindfulness may recognize the ways in which we may edit our experiences. When editing our experiences, we distort the present moment through routinized and habitual behaviors that alienate 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). Therefore, incorporating the mindfulness practice as part of the research process can potentially lead to richer data.

Brummans (2014) is one of the few scholars to provide a conceptual piece that addresses the link between mindfulness and qualitative research. Other qualitative research method scholars have suggested a potential link without providing a specific way to build and practice the connection between mindfulness and qualitative research (e.g., Brummans, 2014; Fielden, 2012; Nagata, 2002). Merriam (2009) suggests that research plans develop and evolve over the course of the study, which requires the researcher to remain flexible. Qualitative researchers value a creative and fluid research environment in which the researcher embraces ambiguity and remains open to the unfolding experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Mindfulness can be used to support the notion of emergent design and can help researchers exercise flexibility while in the research setting. Practicing mindfulness allows understanding of the phenomenon to emerge on its own without the researcher attempting to control the process, thus embracing the emergent design.

The qualitative researcher is compelled to work with whatever happens in the field and to let things happen instead of trying to force or impose predetermined meanings onto situations. Yin (2014) suggests that the researcher should remain adaptive to the research setting and avoid biases by being aware of contradicting data. Practicing mindfulness requires

being open to the eventfulness of situations because everyday life is changing, which prevents predetermination as suggested by Yin (2014).

Cultivating awareness through mindfulness removes the duality associated with research (researcher vs. participant) and creates an intentional relationship where the participant and researcher are participating in the co-construction of the data; this is a unique aspect of qualitative research (Brummans, 2014). The researcher and the participant are joined into one reality, where knowledge comes from this unique interaction (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2013); the researcher and the participant are inseparable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Mindfulness practices could strengthen and further develop this intentional relationship between the researcher and the participant as well as enhance the openness, curiosity and awareness that guide the research process.

Despite the poignant links by the aforementioned scholars, the authors do not provide any details or directions on how mindfulness can be incorporated into qualitative research. Fielden (2012) provides some direction on how to incorporate mindfulness training for qualitative researchers, but the suggestions are more classroom-based and take place before the researcher enters the research setting. She does give one mention of meditation but does not provide details on how this may be carried out in practice. Therefore, I propose that mindfulness practices or interventions be used prior to and after data collection and analysis to augment this curiosity and awareness. A qualitative researcher who uses mindfulness would be driven by inquisitiveness and open-mindedness about whatever the participant(s) brings up, and would continue to be involved and engaged in the research process despite pre-existing thoughts or habitualized behaviors that may distract from the present moment (Stelter, 2010). In addition, mindfulness could help develop the bricoleur to enhance crystallization, which “requires patience and zen-like contemplation” (Stewart, Gapp, & Harwood, 2017, p. 13).

In a culture that is characterized by information overload and tight deadlines, qualitative researchers need to prioritize and set aside thinking time to protect thought processes and to value each step of the research process (Keegan, 2012). To do so requires researchers to turn off the technology, go outside, and enjoy being human by becoming aware of every-day lived experiences that champion the present moment. Additionally, and in keeping with the ISM approach, mindfulness in qualitative research has the potential to influence the researcher, the participant, and social science research as a whole. It has the potential to liberate researchers from limiting thought, to redefine the mind and its potentiality for seeing and knowing (Kabat-Zinn, 2015). Kabat-Zinn (2003) states that mindfulness “is an invitation to allow oneself to be where one already is and to know the inner and outer landscape of the direct experience in each moment” (p.148).

Experience in Incorporating Mindfulness

To demonstrate how to actually use mindfulness in qualitative research, I will share my recent personal experience of using the practice to enhance my phenomenological study.

Mindfulness has a place in enhancing both the epoché and bracketing elements of phenomenology. A key practice in both phenomenology and mindful inquiry is the bracketing of assumptions to reveal the deep layers of both the conscious and subconscious (Nagata, 2002). The process of epoché helps the qualitative researcher identify and increase awareness of preexisting assumptions and knowledge, which stem from the researcher’s own lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). The next step is to bracket or temporarily set aside these viewpoints to ensure that the essence of the phenomenon develops from the participants’ lived experiences (Valle & Halling, 1989). Mindfulness, or paying attention on purpose, can bring a deep sense of awareness to a researcher’s preexisting knowledge, biases and viewpoints. In doing so, the practice of bracketing may become even more successful with this heightened

awareness via mindfulness. In addition, mindfulness is especially appropriate within this tradition since the phenomenological interview may begin with a conversation or meditative activity since “the interviewer is responsible for creating a climate in which the research participant will feel comfortable and will respond honestly and comprehensively” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114).

Prior to beginning the study, I completed an eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). I incorporated the mindfulness practice into data collection, which is Denzin and Lincoln’s fourth phase of the research process (2003). During this phase, I moved from the comfort of academia into the research setting, which opens up the opportunity for many unique situations to arise. Therefore, throughout data collection, I participated in 10-30 minute meditations before data collection and completed memos about feelings, thoughts and sensations before, during and after the interviews. The memos allowed me to exercise a deeper self-reflexivity and to work on developing characteristics such as being present, focusing, practicing non-judgment and exemplifying integrity to enrich the research process. Fielden (2012) refers to these developed characteristics as “mindful maturity” (p. 137). Below are a few of the themes that emerged from the memos that support how mindfulness enriched the data collection process.

First, when dealing with a participant who said they preferred not to give any specific details related to their answers, I was not rattled by the participant’s lack of detailed responses and remained committed to the interview experience instead of backing away. Using a beginner’s mind, which is showing up to a situation with no assumptions and as if it was the first time, was necessary after this type of interview to provide the best opportunity to treat the next interview as a new and unique experience.

Next, in five cases, participants declined to be audio-recorded, and this information was not always provided in advance. I had to be active and present in the moment to both engage in the conversation and take notes at the same time. The mindfulness meditations helped me capture the participant’s thoughts and experiences in instances absent an audio recorder. Mindfulness meditations helped balance diligently listening and taking notes, while not getting distracted if I felt as though I missed an important reflection from the participant—if a missed reflection was important, chances were it would surface again. It helped me to stay content and still move on when I was only able to capture some of the conversation and to not remain attached to what was missed. Mindfulness also helped me after the interview in going back through the notes and filling in some of the blanks or gaps based on my recollection of the interview in a manner that would not have been as rigorous without paying attention on purpose and being present in the moment.

Third, distractions can be a hindrance during interviews and take away from the conversation with the participant. In some of the memos, I made notes about the distractions that arose during the interviews. Distractions included an email ping, looking at the clock to see how much time has passed, taking notes, background noises or thoughts. To avoid being distracted, I used my mindfulness to practice non-attachment to the things that may occur throughout the course of an interview, recognizing that some are out of my control. This allowed me to focus and keep coming back to the conversation in the present moment. For the distractions that were in my control, once recognized, I made changes in my data collection processes to protect the interview space for both the participants and me.

Last, the mindfulness practice encourages the process of not labeling the sounds, feelings, sensations or anything else for that matter that may arise over the course of a meditation. The practice of not labeling was helpful throughout the data collection process. In the beginning, I would be inclined to want to label an interview as “good” based on the length of time we spoke or how well the participant articulated their narratives. I would label an interview as “bad” if it was short or if the rapport building was not as good as it was with other

participants. However, the interviews that were initially labeled “bad” in the beginning, were not actually that bad once I reviewed the recording alongside the interview transcript.

One interview in particular stands out, where the participant was a female executive who did not have much time for the interview. Her answers seemed short and not as detailed compared to other participants. But after reviewing the transcript and recording, the interview was rich with details even though she spoke frank and to the point. In the end, the interview did not hold up to the initial label I assigned to it. From that moment on, I tried to exercise the practice of not labeling interviews and accepted the conversations as a contribution to data collection without assigning or labeling interviews with a particular quality.

In qualitative research, we strive for trustworthiness instead of reliability and validity, and Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered five criteria to establish trustworthiness. Specifically, the five criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and integrity (1985). Credibility is assessed by the extent to which the findings appear to represent the data. Transferability is assessed to the extent the findings from the study will apply to other contexts. Dependability is assessed by determining if the findings are unique to a particular time and place and consistency of the data. Confirmability is assessed by whether or not interpretations are from the participants and the phenomenon. And lastly, integrity is assessed by whether or not interpretations are influenced by misinformation or unruly conduct by the researcher.

Using mindfulness meditations helped ensure the credibility criteria, to ensure the quality of the data and that it was representative of the findings. Mindfulness enhanced my ability to attune to the present moment and research experience with a certain curiosity, awareness and openness. In doing so, I was able to avoid collecting data with an undisciplined mind and on an autopilot state.

Conclusion

As mentioned, previous qualitative method scholars have discussed the importance of reflexivity throughout the research process and how qualitative research is unique in that the researcher is the actual data collection instrument (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Brummans (2014) and Fielden (2012) are a few of the only scholars to make the specific link between mindfulness and qualitative research. However, despite a few steps forward in terms of discussing the connection and suggesting in-class trainings, no one has really told qualitative researchers how to go about incorporating mindfulness as a qualitative research tool to be used in the field. In this paper, I offered an in-depth discussion of mindfulness and suggested how qualitative researchers may integrate the mindfulness practice into the research process. Also included is a personal account of how mindfulness was incorporated into data collection as part of a phenomenological study. I hope this paper will inspire other researchers to explore the practice of mindfulness to see how they might fuse it into their research practices. In doing so, I believe the research findings will be enriched along with their lives.

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