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EXPLORING THE SELF BY LEARNING TO LISTEN



This chapter, Exploring the Self by Learning to Listen, focuses on researchers' experiences with the self and how they may overcome personal perceived obstacles such as perfectionism and confidence during the research process. By introducing a meditation that focuses on sound, the researcher learns how to welcome in the present moment instead of getting carried away with ruminating thoughts of future predictions or previous experiences. This chapter will also help readers investigate the "researcher self" by giving them the chance to consider their own ontology and epistemology. The chapter ends with a conclusion, key takeaways, and reflection questions. A space for the *Mindful Memos* is included along with a summary of the practice.

EXPLORING THE "RESEARCHER SELF"

Who you are and what you believe matters when you show up to the research setting. Awareness of your past experiences and the knowledge you have gained makes a difference in how you interact with participants through data collection and the insights garnered through data analysis. It is reasonable to have experiences and knowledge that shape the way you think, but awareness of it is key.

Let me share a story to illustrate. I had a former student who was studying to earn his master's degree. I was serving on his thesis committee as the member who would oversee his method of choice. He was interested in conducting interviews with members of the debate community to capture how the COVID-19

pandemic changed the practice of debate by moving it to an online format. It was an insightful idea for a study, especially since this is the first time this community experienced major changes. This was also an ideal topic for him because he was passionate about it—great research ideas often come from topics with which we are ardent. He spent years in the debate community, initially as an undergraduate student debater and later, a debate coach and judge.

Given his proximity to and previous experience with the debate community, I encouraged him to include a statement of researcher reflexivity into the proposal. This was an opportunity for him to reflect on his connection to the topic and how that might impact data collection and analysis. A statement of researcher positionality or reflexivity is where the investigator explores in writing the impact of the research process on the self as well as the influence of the researcher on the research process (Probst & Berenson, 2014). Specifically, Probst and Berenson (2014) defined reflexivity as “awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being studied and, simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher. It is both a state of mind and a set of actions” (p. 64).

At his defense, he discussed the theories he connected with most as his researcher reflexivity instead of his experience with the debate community. It took some time in our discussion for him to realize what we (the committee) meant by investigating his own experiences and knowledge and how both will inform his research process. For example, his research questions were written with value-laden language that reflected his potential biases. We brought this to his attention as well as other elements of the proposal that mirrored his experiences. Therefore, for his revised proposal, we challenged him to start with reflexivity so that he could identify how his experiences may inform the project and how he plans to position himself within that understanding and expertise. The committee and I assured him that in spending time unveiling his insider perspective, he would enrich and strengthen his final project.

The Role of Ontology and Epistemology. The first step in assessing one’s position within research is to understand how ontology and epistemology impact the research process. Ontology is defined as the worldview and assumptions or view of reality from which researchers operate in their quest for original knowledge (Schwandt, 2007). “An ontological view conceives of or apprehends the world from a specific standpoint” (Arneson, 2009a, p. 696). What topics scholars choose to study and how they elucidate the findings of their research mirror the assumptions they make about the world around them (Arneson, 2009a). Distinctive ontologies are going to result in alternative understandings, which lead to differences in conceptualizing and theorizing about the topic under investigation (Arneson, 2009a). For a full

description of all the different ontologies and to learn more about the different ontological positions, see Merriam and Tisdell (2016).

Epistemology deals with exploring what is knowledge and the understanding of how knowledge is generated (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2013). This philosophical perspective assesses “the nature, scope, and limits of human knowledge” (Arneson, 2009b, p. 351). It is the science of knowing (Babbie, 2013), and seeks to uncover the relationship between the researcher and the known (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In other words, epistemological assumptions center around knowledge generation and “how we come to know what we think we know” (Arneson, 2009b, p. 350). For a full synopsis of epistemological stances, I encourage you to pursue additional reading to uncover your epistemological alignment (see Tracy, 2020).

My Researcher Positionality Statement. You will be encouraged to reflect on your alignment and stances as a researcher here shortly. But before you do, I think it is beneficial to see an example. Below is my researcher positionality statement.

I position myself as a qualitative researcher who aligns with the interpretivist ontology and epistemology. From this perspective, I understand that the knowledge of social reality arises from the essential interconnection that exists between the researcher and participants. The researcher and participants that are *invited* to be in the study are connected in such a way that who they are and how they view and understand the world are fundamental to how they process and make meaning of themselves, others, and the world around them (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

As an interpretive scholar, I understand that methodological instruments are not used in a void, but rather we, the researchers, are the instruments to guide the methods (cf. Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Interpretivist scholars cannot separate who we are and what we know from the research experiences, since our ontology and epistemology are cultivated by and supported throughout our lived experiences. The result is knowledge claims that reflect both the experiences of the researcher and the participants. Through rigorous data analysis, the lived experiences of the participants are brought to the forefront to be examined and understood.

In addition to being an interpretive qualitative researcher, I am also a communication scholar. Specifically, I study internal communication and employee engagement under the umbrella of public relations. My scholarship centers on understanding the employees’ lived experience, so that organizations can develop meaningful internal communication that supports a healthy and productive work environment. I provide theoretical and practical implications

to facilitate and promote the fundamental understanding that employees are not a means to an end, but instead are human beings with intrinsic value. Given my involvement and awareness with this subject matter, I arrive at all research settings with my own perceptions and experiences. Although this knowledge cannot be removed or ignored, it can be acknowledged and therefore curbed during the different stages of a research study to ensure I stay open to the participants' experiences and not be induced by my own.

Taking the Researcher Positionality One Step Further. As discussed above, my ontology and epistemology inform the way in which I view knowledge generation and the research process. Furthermore, I wrote this book from an interpretivist vantage point because this is the way in which I see the world. The examples used in this book also reflect the field of communication since it's my research and teaching background. However, this doesn't mean that a critical scholar or a post-positivist scholar cannot use the tools presented in this book; in fact, I encourage them. Similarly, people from different disciplines will also have much to gain from the narratives and skills presented in this book. I simply share this information to articulate and clarify to the readers my point of view in the following text. In doing so, readers are clear as to how my values and expectations influenced the words written in the book. Clarity in one's research position matters, and we should all be striving to inform readers of our assumptions, dispositions, and experiences regarding the research process.

As you pursue your own research endeavors, I encourage you to include a researcher positionality statement in the method section of your manuscripts. Many journals expect this information to be included in submissions. From my own publishing experience, I have had editors request my researcher positionality statement be integrated in the final version of a manuscript. I also suggest to scholars whose work I am reviewing to incorporate this information. By including a statement that articulates who we are as researchers, readers can learn about our particular values and expectations and how those guided the research process and influenced the insights of the study (Maxwell, 2013).

GIVE THE RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY STATEMENT A TRY!

Now, it is your turn to write your position as a researcher. First, consider your research interests. What discipline does your research fall under? Why are you interested in studying certain topics? What contributions do you hope to make with your research? Second, contemplate your

ontology and epistemology. Explore extra reading, since this chapter covered the basic definition of both. How would you describe your ontology and epistemology? How will these beliefs impact you and your participants' experience? I encourage you to write freely while considering these questions—not focusing on getting it right, but instead creating your narrative on paper so you can begin to reflect on your position.

RESEARCHER ROADBLOCKS AND LISTENING IN THE PRESENT MOMENT TO WORK THROUGH THEM

As mentioned, our knowledge and experiences bolster who we are when we show up to the researcher setting. However, we might have personal roadblocks that stifle our abilities as researchers. Those might include a lack of confidence when learning a new method and perfectionism. Mindfulness practices can be a useful tool to overcome these limitations. Specifically, the listening meditation can help bring us back to the present moment, and out of our own heads. In other words, many of our limitations are perceived and not a true depiction of reality. This means we must overcome the mental narratives we tell ourselves about what we can and cannot do. Some of those narratives have been with us for most of our lives because of the experiences we have had, what we have learned, or the messages communicated to us. These narratives are thoughts, and thoughts do not define who we are. Thoughts are simply thoughts—nothing more, nothing less.

However, the thoughts we have about our confidence in the research setting—whether we *should* be conducting this type of research, or only submitting a project if it is perfect—can limit our ability to move forward and collect quality data that make a difference in our respective fields either in practice or through theory development. One solution to navigating these emotions and experiences is to focus on the present moment by using sound.

Sounds are all around us and can help tether us to the present moment. What this means is that when your mind begins to drift into a negative or limiting thought about your abilities or experiences, you can bring yourself out of that thought by focusing on the sounds around you. Sometimes, we can get hung up on these thoughts, but sounds can be the tool out of the trance. Let's dive into how these might play out in the research setting and how the listening meditation can assist with navigating these experiences.

Limited Confidence. As with all things that are new, we may not have the confidence to pursue it. As novices in the research arena, like with employing a new

method of data collection, we might be intimidated to give it a try. For example, if you are an experienced qualitative researcher who has relied on interviews and focus groups for data collection, when embarking on participant observations, you may have some reservations. Or maybe you are a quantitative researcher who has never conducted an interview; you may lack the confidence you tend to have when administering a survey. This lack of confidence may lead some academics and researchers to experience imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is defined as “doubting your abilities and feeling like a fraud at work” (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021, p. 1). This is a natural response to being new at something, which means one may lack confidence in their abilities.

Let me illustrate with an example, which shows that even the most experienced scholars sometimes run into confidence issues. I have been working on a grant-funded project with colleagues in my department. We are conducting interviews with professionals in our fields regarding their opinions on disinformation. I am the only qualitative scholar on the team, and the other three researchers are experts in quantitative methods. Prior to collecting data, I led a brief training session on how to conduct interviews. I also encouraged my team to practice listening to sounds in the present moment anytime they started to doubt their abilities. This prompted them to not get swept away in limiting thought processes and brought them back to the present moment so they could focus on the task at hand: having great conversations with professionals in our field.

Perfectionism. Another individual limitation a researcher may face is perfectionism. Social work scholar and *New York Times* best-selling author Brené Brown has researched the confines and implications of perfectionism. Specifically, perfectionism “can be exhausting because hustling is exhausting. It’s a never-ending performance” (Brown, 2012, p. 133). It can also be crushing to our creativity (Brown, 2012). Therefore, perfectionism has the potential to restrict the researcher throughout various places in the research process.

From my experience, students can often be hindered by the need to be perfect. The unrealistic expectations students place on themselves impact their willingness to learn by taking risks. These risks may mean that the end grade does not reflect their initial hopes of earning top marks. However, in making mistakes and accepting imperfections, learning ensues, and knowledge is gained.

I have one previous student who stands out in my mind that we could all emulate since she was not stifled by perfectionism. She was willing to take risks in the classroom in ways I have never seen from a student. Most of the time, graduate

and undergraduate students are most concerned about their grade and make calculated steps to ensure they get the best grade possible. Very rarely do students seek to learn simply for the experience of learning; most students are interested in learning to receive a grade. However, this particular student was different. She was willing to take risks in learning a new method, attempting a different way of writing, and accepted that since it was new, she may not be great at it the first time. Her willingness to hit a few bumps in the beginning paid off generously as she advanced quicker than some of her peers in the class simply because she was willing to take risks and was not stifled by perfectionism.

We may not all have the skills or experiences that support the willingness to take risks and be imperfect. However, a listening meditation can be one tool to help ground us in the present moment when our minds try to take us down the path of thinking we need to be perfect. Perfectionism tells us that we can't do good enough, or that what we have done isn't good enough—but nothing is truly perfect, which is hard to believe when we spend so much time online in a curated world. By focusing on listening to sounds in the present moment when our minds start to trail off with thoughts and desires for a perfect research study or a perfect paper, we can stop the ruminating so that we can move forward. Without this tool, we will become exhausted and unproductive by the overpowering desire to always be perfect. The next section offers a step-by-step approach to learn how to listen for sounds to forget any preconceived desire for control and perfectionism.

THE PRACTICE: LISTENING TO SOUNDS MEDITATION

Meditation is a practice, which means it takes some time to learn how to sit in silence. However, even after years of practice, some days can be harder than others to sit and focus on being present in the moment. This can be humbling, and it helps encourage us to always return to the practice because we never “conquer” meditation.

The following practice is going to introduce you to meditation by first focusing on your breath and then focusing on sound. This will be an “easier” meditation and a great place to start if you have never meditated before. Again, using sound can help bring us into the present moment so we can get out of our minds and ruminating thoughts. Let us begin.

You will want to begin this meditation by finding a quiet place to sit. Be sure you are comfortable so you can sit for 10 minutes in the same place without distractions. We will be building up the time we spend meditating over the course of this book—so let's start with an achievable amount of time

and set a timer for 10 minutes. Your sitting position should be active and alert yet relaxed at the same time. Remember, this is most likely your first time meditating, so be sure to be compassionate and understanding with yourself if you find the practice difficult. Even if you find it hard, you will try again tomorrow. The most experienced practitioners have hard days too, so it is not a big deal if you find your mind all over the place.

Start by sitting in a comfortable position with a straight back. Take a deep breath and audibly exhale. Close your eyes. Rest your hands gently in your lap or on your knees. Relax your neck and shoulders. Relax the muscles in your face. Take another deep, audible breath and feel your body begin to relax.

As you settle into this moment, begin focusing on your breath. Hear yourself breath in and then breath out. Focus on the quiet moment that happens at the end of every exhale and at the beginning of every inhale. You will see there is a gentle pause at the beginning and end of every exhale.

To help calm the mind, focus on counting to 10. At the end of one cycle of breath, where you complete one inhale and then one exhale, count one. Inhale deeply and exhale, then count two. Inhale and exhale, then count three. Continue in this way until you reach 10.

Now, let us transition the practice to listening to sounds. Begin by noticing in this moment the sounds in the room. What do you hear? Do you hear a sound in your immediate space? Are you able to hear sounds that are far away? As you focus on sounds, be sure not to get lost in thinking about the sounds or focusing on what is making the sound or labeling the sound. Just rest in the experience of listening, without judging or identifying the sound; sit with the raw vibrations that are the essence of hearing sounds.

Be open and explore the sounds that you could not hear at the beginning of the meditation. Sounds will come and go throughout the meditation. You might hear sounds from the body, from the room you are in, or from nature outside. There might also be times when there are no sounds; in this case, focus on the silence. You have nothing to do, nothing to fix or change about this moment, but accept it exactly as it is.

In terms of awareness, know that all sounds are equal. Yet you might gravitate toward certain sounds, liking some and disliking others. See if it is possible to rest in awareness of hearing without quantifying the sounds, letting go of the stories you might have about these particular sounds. Also know that you might be aware of thoughts, feelings, and body sensations. This is quite natural. But keep bringing your attention back to simply hearing.

Once the timer goes off, begin to slowly move your body, and open your eyes to bring yourself back into the room. Notice how you feel? How does your body feel? How does your mind feel? How can you take this sharp,

focused attention into the rest of your day? Take a few minutes to pay attention to the experience of focusing your mind on the present moment for a period of time using sound. Record your thoughts, feelings, and sensations about the experience in your *Mindful Memos*.

The listening to sounds meditation will be your practice for the next 2 weeks. Dedicate 10 minutes each day to this meditation. Throughout the next 2 weeks of practice and memoing you will begin to see small changes. Be sure to come to the practice every day with an open mind no matter what your experience was like the previous day or what type of experience you hope to have that day. To see how you change and evolve over time, come to the practice every day with an open mind. It is important to complete the *Mindful Memos* at the end of each meditation so the small changes can be captured. The nuance will be missed without the memos. This practice sets the foundation for others you will encounter in the upcoming chapters.

CONCLUSION

This chapter began by discussing the researcher self, including brief definitions of ontology and epistemology. A researcher positionality statement section was included, which encourages the development of an individual statement. Limitations of the researcher's thoughts were also discussed, and the listening to sounds meditation was introduced as a way to navigate the desire for control and perfectionism. The steps to the listening to sounds meditation were included, which is the meditation that should be practiced over the next 2 weeks. This mindfulness practice will give researchers an introduction to meditation, providing them a useful exercise to practice tuning into the present moment so that limiting beliefs are left behind and forgotten.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Who you are and what you believe matter when you show up to the research setting. Awareness of your past experiences and the knowledge you have gained make a difference in how you interact with participants through data collection and the insights garnered through data analysis.
- The first step in assessing one's position within research is to understand how ontology and epistemology impact the research process.

- Researchers are encouraged to include a positionality statement in the method section of future manuscripts.
- We might have personal roadblocks that stifle our abilities as researchers. Those might include a lack of confidence when learning a new method and perfectionism.
- The listening to sounds meditation can be one tool to help ground us in the present moment when our minds try to take us down the path of believing we cannot do something or striving for perfectionism.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Based on what you have learned, what is your ontological stance? Where do you align in terms of your epistemology? How do you think these vantage points will inform your research process?
- What concerns do you have about conducting research? What components of the research process excite you?
- How might your previous experiences inform the research topics you are interested in studying?
- Have you written a researcher reflexivity or positionality statement? If so, what was that experience like for you? If not, how do you feel about capturing your experience and knowledge on paper?

THE 2-WEEK PRACTICE: LISTENING TO SOUNDS MEDITATION

The listening to sounds meditation will be your meditation practice for the next 2 weeks. Dedicate time each day to the listening to sounds meditation to see how you are learning to hone your focus and access the present moment through sound. At the end of each daily meditation, complete a mindful memo that captures your experience. The memos are key to capturing the nuance of how your practice will shift and change over time. Be prepared to welcome whatever arises during your first few meditations. Most importantly, be patient and open with your experience as you learn a new skill.

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