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Article

"Active Waiting": Habits and the Practice of Conducting Qualitative Research

Matthew R. Hunt, PhD
Postdoctoral Fellow, Centre for Research on Ethics (CRÉUM)
University of Montreal *and* Postdoctoral Fellow,
Department of Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics,
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Abstract
Learning to conduct good qualitative research passes beyond the acquisition of research knowledge and technical skill. A variety of attributes and abilities are important in the research process such as creativity, flexibility, and inquisitiveness, among others. Quality in qualitative research also requires the development and practice of specific habits. Such habits are likely a taken-for-granted aspect of qualitative inquiry for seasoned researchers; they might not be as obvious for less experienced researchers or students. In this article the author examines the role of habits in and on the practice of qualitative research. To illustrate this topic, he examines how researcher habits can influence the pacing of an inquiry. Qualitative research requires the learned practice of active waiting: striking a balance throughout a research project between moving forward and advancing the research process and, on the other hand, allowing adequate time for the full development of each aspect of the research.

Keywords: habits, qualitative research, reflexivity, research methods, teaching

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Correspondence should be addressed to Matthew Hunt, Centre for Research on Ethics (CREUM), University of Montreal, C.P. 6128, succ. Centre-ville, Montreal, QC, H3C 3J7, Canada, or email: 1matthew.hunt@gmail.com.

Introduction

In this article, I aim to illuminate the role of habits in the conduct of qualitative research. The habits of researchers and the ways that habits shape practice influence the conduct of research at many levels. Habits can be productive and contribute positively to the success of the research. Other habits or dispositions can limit or stifle inquiry. In this discussion I focus on the practice of "doing" the various tasks and activities associated with qualitative methodologies. I suggest that researchers seeking to practice reflexivity in qualitative inquiry should consider how habits and dispositions might influence the decisions they make in carrying out their research. This discussion of habits highlights the ways that qualitative research is an embodied practice. I illustrate this discussion by considering the role of habits in relation to decisions about project pacing and describe an approach to pacing that I have termed "active waiting."

To successfully conduct qualitative research, researchers need relevant knowledge and technical skills. However, although theoretical and technical expertise is necessary, it is insufficient to ensure quality in the research process and its products. Beyond the acquisition of research knowledge and the development of a specific set of skills, a variety of attributes and abilities are important, such as creativity, flexibility, and inquisitiveness, among others. In addition, qualitative research requires the development and practice of specific habits. A habit is a "more or less self-actuating disposition or tendency to engage in a previously adopted or acquired form of action" (Camic, 1986, p. 1044). Habitual practices require a minimum of reflection or deliberation. Thus they allow efficiency of thought and action because they occur at a tacit and informal level (Dewey, 1922).

Habits are oriented by the researcher's disposition, the "matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 83) that organizes practices. For example, individual dispositions will lead some to be risk-takers, others to be cautious or timid (Swartz, 2002). As such, individuals "do not simply conform to the external constraints and opportunities given them. They adapt to or resist, seize the moment or miss the chance, in characteristic manners" (p. 63S). It is important to note that although dispositions contribute to shaping an individual's actions and practices, they do not determine them.

Habits are developed and oriented by a range of sources. Early socialization and experience is a critical component of habit formation. The development of habits in the context of research will also be shaped through processes of training, modeling, and mentoring. Researcher habits might also be reinforced or challenged based on the conditions and context in which the research process occurs.

Reflexivity, dispositions and habits

An important and ongoing discussion in the qualitative research literature relates to the influence of the researcher on and in the research process. This discussion has examined the situatedness of the researcher and the ways in which political, cultural, and social location influence research decisions, data collection, and interpretation of data (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). Many commentators have emphasized the need for researchers to examine their biases and preconceptions. Some have encouraged attention to disciplinary biases and perspectives as well as to individual bias (Thorne, Joachim, Paterson, & Canam, 2002). The term *reflexivity* is used to describe a researcher's sensitivity to the often subtle ways that their particular location, experience, worldview, and assumptions contribute to shaping the data that is collected and how it is analyzed. A reflexive researcher practices self-reflection and self-criticism in evaluating his

or her impact on the research (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The reflexive researcher will also consider the perspectives and voices of research participants, and the audience who will be recipients of the products of the research (Patton, 2002). Reflexivity has been linked to quality in research (Mays & Pope, 2000), rigor (Koch & Harrington, 1998), and ethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Practical approaches to practicing reflexivity in research have been articulated to offer researchers tools and strategies to put these ideas into practice (Finlay & Gough, 2003; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

To date, discussions of reflexivity have not drawn attention to the ways that a researcher's habits and dispositions can influence an inquiry. This might be an oversight if researcher habits do indeed contribute to shaping the research process and its products in unacknowledged ways. In this light, considering habits in discussions of reflexivity would help promote attention to the role of habits in qualitative research.

Habits and research pacing

To illustrate the role of habits in qualitative research, I will consider how habits and dispositions influence pacing decisions. One of the practices that supports quality in qualitative inquiry is the discipline of deliberate and purposeful pacing. An overly hurried approach to pacing will not allow necessary time and space to adequately develop the various steps and components of an inquiry. Such an approach is likely to lead to early closure of analysis, shutting off of avenues of inquiry, and stifled opportunities to follow up on hunches and insights. Individuals whose tendency is to rush or to choose efficiency over thoroughness might be particularly inclined to this approach. Contextual features, institutional structures, and external considerations might also favor this orientation; timelines, funding constraints, expectations of others, and a variety of external commitments might all be relevant factors. It can be hard to resist a tendency to rush in an academic or research team environment that encourages researchers to advance quickly. In effect, a more measured approach to project pacing might seem unrealistic in many academic environments. The conditions and context of academic research production and training might thus reinforce dispositions that can limit quality in research or contribute to the development of unhelpful habits for new researchers and students.

A contrasting approach is also possible. As well as not rushing the research process, researchers need to avoid adopting a more passive approach to their inquiry. An approach to project pacing that is characterized by timidity will limit the development of the research and the potential for the products of the research to contribute to knowledge and theory development (Cutcliffe, 2003). Individuals whose habitual disposition is to be more cautious, hesitant, or perfectionistic will be more likely to adopt a timid approach to advancing the inquiry. This approach is unlikely to be reinforced by the environment of academic research. However, some graduate students might be more likely to fall into this pattern if they feel isolated, unsure, or undersupported in conducting their research.

Attention to the role of habits on project pacing can help guard against potential pitfalls at either end of a continuum: the tendency to force the inquiry or the tendency to be timid.

Practicing, and failing to practice, active waiting

I write from the perspective of a relatively novice qualitative researcher, having recently completed my second qualitative research project. My initial reflections on the role of habits in research took place in the interval between these inquiries, after completing the first study and as I began to elaborate the design for the second. At that time, I wrote a series of reflective memos

about active waiting as I reflected on my first experiences in conducting qualitative research. I use the term *active waiting* to describe the need for the researcher to achieve a balance throughout a research project between moving forward and advancing the research process, and on the other hand allowing adequate space and time for the full development of each aspect of the research.[1] In this way, active waiting directs attention to how habits and dispositions influence pacing decisions. Active waiting became a helpful way to frame my sense of what I had missed in the first research experience; in retrospect it was apparent to me that I had rushed aspects of my research, particularly during the development of the analysis. There were structural reasons for this—the project was conducted as part of a master's program, I was trying to meet specific deadlines, and I was eager to move on to the next project—but my research approach was also influenced by habit and by my orientation toward the research process. This was particularly true during data analysis. My disposition for being "as efficient as possible" sometimes meant that I moved to the next step when spending more time on a particular task would have enhanced the richness of the analysis (for example, too quickly settling on categories without sufficiently challenging and questioning the analytic structure I was developing). While conducting the study, I was not particularly aware of how my dispositions and habits contributed to shaping the research process.

In discussing this topic with others, it became apparent that the opposite experience can occur. A fellow graduate student related how she finds it easier to linger on aspects of the research process and not push forward to the steps that follow. She is inclined to review and reconsider each step repeatedly. Such an orientation might be one of waiting but not active engagement. As experienced by my colleague, this approach results in a slow progression between research steps. Timidity in the pacing of the research might lead the researcher to become bogged down in the early stages, and the inquiry might be constrained by a lack of dynamism. Such an approach will also have practical implications for student researchers. An overly protracted research project will delay completion of one's training and might lead some to abandon their studies.

Attending to the role of habits

Being alert to the role that habits can have on pacing decisions provides a framework for testing such decisions. Researchers will be primed to examine the pacing of their project and ask themselves questions about how and why they are moving between research steps. They might consider whether they have lost patience with a particular aspect of the project and if they have invested the needed energy and attention, and in the right directions. If they become stuck on a particular aspect of the research they will explore the possibility that they are lingering unnecessarily. Attention to these possibilities will assist researchers in avoiding an overly rushed or overly timid approach to the inquiry.

Alertness to the role of habits on pacing decisions will promote deliberate and purposeful pacing. For example, as data analysis progresses, this orientation supports researchers to consider their provisional findings with tentativeness. Instead of rushing to finalize the analytic structure, researchers can choose to read reflectively in new directions that are opened up by the analysis, to seek out critical feedback from colleagues and mentors, and to present provisional findings at conferences and seminars. Depending on the method they employ, they might also invite research participants to report on how well the provisional findings fit with their experiences.[2] Purposeful pacing of the research will promote the conditions required for the iterative processes of research to occur. This approach also orients researchers to understanding their research products in ways that reflect what Emden and Sandelowski (1999) described as the "criterion of uncertainty" (p. 6).

Another impact of this approach is that it supports creativity and interpretive risk-taking. The

willingness to take risks is particularly important in the analytic process (Morse, 1994). Risk-taking will be curtailed by a passive or timid approach as such an orientation is not conducive to inductive imagining. Even prolonged reflection and introspection can limit inquiry if the researcher perseverates and does not strive for "intellectual entrepreneurship" in the development of analysis (Cutcliffe, 2003). A more rushed approach might involve risk-taking, but researchers are less likely to evaluate and assess their provisional findings. They might stop short of developing the degree of interpretation that is congruent with the methodological framework of their inquiry.

How do you know if you are pacing your project appropriately? There are no generalizable criteria to evaluate pacing decisions; however, the following questions will help researchers (as well as mentors and supervisors) to consider the pacing of their project.

These questions could be asked when moving between steps of the project[3]:

1. Why am I moving on to the next step?
2. Have I made reasonable efforts to be comprehensive in completing this component of the research?
3. Have I lost patience with this step of the research?
4. Is it possible that moving forward now will limit the quality of my project?

The following questions could be asked periodically during stages of the research that are more protracted (to guard against being timid or unduly hesitant):

1. What still needs to be accomplished before completing this step of the research?
2. Am I lingering unnecessarily (through timidity, perfectionism, or uncertainty of what to do next)?
3. Can I move forward without losing something important from the inquiry?

Practicing, and failing to practice, active waiting: Reprise

Despite thinking and writing about active waiting in the space between my first and second qualitative projects, and my attempts to put active waiting into practice during the second study, I still rushed aspects of this inquiry. This research was conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation. In the spirit of reflexivity and with the goal of illustrating the challenges of practicing active waiting, I will briefly describe two aspects of the research in which I did not succeed in practicing active waiting.

In this project I had a specific plan for purposive recruitment of participants. I was interviewing nurses, doctors, and midwives with experience in humanitarian work. I planned to recruit participants from these professions who had worked in a range of geographic locations, been members of a variety of nongovernmental organizations, and contributed to different types of humanitarian projects. I was only partly successful in these goals. Greater forbearance in the final stages of participant recruitment might have led to my identifying and recruiting a set of participants that more closely matched my multiple sampling objectives.

The second moment of rushing came later in the research process. I wrote my dissertation using a manuscript-based format (the dissertation consisted of journal-type articles rather than being in the form of a book). After having completed the main findings paper for the project, members of my thesis committee suggested that I include a second results paper. There was ample and interesting material from the project to justify reporting other aspects of the analysis not captured

in the original findings manuscript. In consultation with my supervisor, I launched into the process of drawing out from the analysis material for a second article and writing it up. Despite this additional component to the inquiry, I elected to keep to my previously established timeline for submitting the dissertation. Funding considerations, as well as my desire to complete the project, influenced this decision. This said, I thought this goal was still realistic. However, allowing more time would have facilitated the development of a more comprehensive and robust accounting of the dimension of the analysis that I aimed to report in this manuscript. The version of the material included in my dissertation was less richly developed as a result.

Clearly, reflection about habits does not immunize a researcher from the impact of habits and disposition, or the various pressures and constraints of academic work. I am confident however that despite rushing certain areas of the second inquiry, on the whole I took a more balanced approach to pacing the different steps and components of the project. I deliberately resisted my inclination to move forward quickly at various moments in conducting the research.

Qualitative research as an embodied practice

By placing the role that habits and dispositions play in qualitative research in the foreground, this discussion points to the location of the researcher within the research. Researchers might be conscious of their embodied selves as they collect data. This might be particularly true for those who engage in participant observation fieldwork (Savage, 2000). Researchers might also be aware of the role of the body in individual or group interviews: Gestures, positioning and body language are all part of the exchange, though not captured by tape recorders or rendered into text during transcription. However, the practices of researchers at other moments in the research process are also embodied (Sandelowski, 2002). Indeed, habits are not just patterns of mind. In this way, attending to habits also points to the conduct of qualitative research as an embodied practice.

Acknowledging habits in mentoring and training

The training of novice qualitative researchers requires more than learning a set of procedures and techniques (Li & Seale, 2007). Various commentators have discussed the importance of researchers having the opportunity to develop craft skills associated with qualitative inquiry (Hammersley, 2004; Seale, 1999). In this context, apprenticeship and engaged mentoring play critical roles in supporting novice researchers. A relevant topic for consideration in the training of researchers is the role of habits in qualitative inquiry. For some seasoned researchers habits that promote successful research might be a taken-for-granted aspect of qualitative inquiry. Although experienced researchers practice particular habits, they might not always be conscious of the role habits play because these dispositions and actions are deeply integrated aspects of how they go about “doing” research. For novice researchers, habits that promote quality in research might be less obvious and might not come naturally to some. In such cases, particular habits need to be nurtured and developed. This learning is more likely to occur when habits are acknowledged and discussed in mentoring relationships. Deliberately highlighting the role of dispositions and habits on research might be particularly valuable in scholarly disciplines where qualitative methods are less common (Eakin & Mykhalovskiy, 2005). I propose that alertness to the role of one’s habits is a topic that should be drawn out, discussed, and modeled in teaching and mentoring relationships.

Conclusion

Habits influence the conduct of qualitative research. However, the role of habits in qualitative inquiry has received limited attention in discussions of reflexivity. To illustrate the role of habits on the research process, I have examined how habits influence decisions related to the pacing of research. I have described an approach to pacing that I term active waiting. Active waiting is practiced when the researcher strikes a balance between advancing the research and fully developing each step of the process of inquiry. Purposeful pacing through the practice of active waiting encourages researchers to adequately develop each aspect of the research and then to move on to the next.

Critical and reflective evaluation of the role of habits in shaping research will promote attentiveness to the influence of habits, and encourage the development of habits that foster research quality. This is an important topic for mentors and supervisors to discuss with trainees. Thinking about the role of habits on project pacing might be a useful way of bringing these issues into view for new researchers.

Notes

1. I use *active waiting* to describe an orientation to pacing decisions throughout the research process. The concept of active waiting could also help to capture a necessary attitude during the conduct of research interviews: deliberately pacing the interview so that there is sufficient time and space for the respondent to feel comfortable, pause, or be silent if necessary, and express her- or himself in an unhurried fashion.
2. The method employed might also influence whether a researcher rushes aspects of the inquiry. For example, researchers using traditional ethnographic methods that include extended immersion in the field might be less likely to rush the collection or analysis of data than researchers using other methodologies.
3. Of course, researchers may conduct multiple activities simultaneously.

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