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Exercising the Mind: A Review of Stretching Exercises for Qualitative Researchers

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Abstract

In this third version of *Stretching Exercises for Qualitative Researchers*, Janesick (2011) continues to refine and expand upon ways in which qualitative researchers—both new to the field and experienced—can extend and hone a number of skills essential to being an effective researcher. This book will be helpful to those wishing to learn more about and practice the art of qualitative research. Janesick combines valuable information and practical exercises in this text, which will assist in the development of skills essential to qualitative research, including interviewing, observing, journaling, narrating, analyzing, interpreting, and collaborating. This new edition includes a discussion on using technology in qualitative research and interviewing, new exercises, and additional discussion on data analysis and interpretation.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Dewey, Photography, Creativity, Stretching, Observation

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Exercising the Mind: A Review of *Stretching Exercises for Qualitative Researchers*

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*In this third version of *Stretching Exercises for Qualitative Researchers*, Janesick (2011) continues to refine and expand upon ways in which qualitative researchers—both new to the field and experienced—can extend and hone a number of skills essential to being an effective researcher. This book will be helpful to those wishing to learn more about and practice the art of qualitative research. Janesick combines valuable information and practical exercises in this text, which will assist in the development of skills essential to qualitative research, including interviewing, observing, journaling, narrating, analyzing, interpreting, and collaborating. This new edition includes a discussion on using technology in qualitative research and interviewing, new exercises, and additional discussion on data analysis and interpretation. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Dewey, Photography, Creativity, Stretching, Observation.*

In this third version of *Stretching Exercises for Qualitative Researchers*, Janesick (2011) continues to refine and expand upon ways in which qualitative researchers—both new to the field and experienced—can expand and hone a number of skills essential to being an effective researcher. This book combines valuable information, as well as practical exercises, to assist in the development of interviewing, observing, journaling, narrating, analyzing, interpreting, and collaborating skills, which Janesick refers to as “habits of mind” (p. 1), as discussed by Dewey (see Dewey, 1910, for example). These habits, Janesick argues, are essential for the qualitative researcher to develop his or her most important tool: oneself. Throughout this text, Janesick makes the case that these habits—the observation habit, the narrative writing habit, the habit of analysis, the habit of interpretation, the habit of reflective journaling, the habit of creativity, and the habit of collaboration—need to be exercised, need to be *stretched* on a very frequent, if not daily, basis, and will help “train the mind, the eye and the soul together” (p. 3) to develop and refine these techniques. As Janesick reminds her readers: “the qualitative researcher is the research instrument, [and] one has to sharpen that instrument by training the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the mouth and body to communicate” (p. xvii).

The concept of stretching exercises as a means of developing qualitative research skills, Janesick (2011) notes, developed out of and has been influenced by her background in dance, yoga, and meditation. About this central concept, Janesick tells the reader that “[s]tretching implies that you are moving from a static point to an active one. It means that you are going beyond the point at which you now stand” (p. 2). Indeed, in this book, readers are encouraged to actively participate in a number of exercises to stretch their thinking, their abilities, their skills, and their creativity, which will take them

past the point at which they currently stand. Janesick also encourages readers to make these habits of mind a practice, and explains:

The word *practice* is used to describe yoga and meditation as a practice. This resonates with qualitative research as a practice in itself. Qualitative research skills and techniques need development on a daily basis. This is like practicing yoga postures called *asanas*. Meditation is a reflective practice akin to the thinking time qualitative researchers need to make sense of the data collected. (p. xvi-xvii).

As this definition implies, developing these habits and adopting them as a practice takes time, effort, reflection, and intention, as well as the willingness to see the old in new ways and to go beyond where you are currently standing.

As mentioned earlier in this review, Janesick's (2011) work has been influenced by the work of Dewey (1910) and, specifically, his writing "on education and art as experience, aesthetics, and habits of mind" (p. 13). In describing the habit of creativity, one mode that Janesick discusses is the use of photography as a way to further explore participants' lived experiences. The use of photographs as a supplement to a paper-based survey or interview can enhance the research and add validity and reliability to the study (Harper, 2002) and has been recognized and established as a research method in the social sciences (Ketelle, 2010).

Another goal of this book, according to Janesick (2011), is to debunk some of the more common "misconceptions" (p. 7) regarding qualitative research. Specifically, Janesick makes the case that, through the practice of the exercises and activities outlined in this text, some of these misconceptions can be reduced. The following are the four misconceptions that Janesick hopes to alleviate: 1). doing qualitative research is easy; 2). qualitative methods should only be learned to supplement quantitative work; 3). interviews and observations can easily be done with little to no prior practice; and 4). that "anyone can write a journal with no practice, preparation, or quiet time" (p. 7). While the exercises (discussed later in this review) are simple in terms of not requiring any fancy equipment or a high level of background knowledge, they are certainly exercises that will require stretching and help the beginning or intermediate qualitative researcher to develop his or her skills.

This book is organized by habit, and leads the reader through chapters on Qualitative Research and Habits of Mind (Chapter 1); The Observation and Writing Habit (Chapter 2); Advancing the Observation and Reflection Habit (Chapter 3); The Interview and Writing Habit (Chapter 4); The Creative Habit (Chapter 5); and The Analysis and Writing Habit (Chapter 6). Each of these chapters is then broken down into a number of sections, which include introductory and background discussion, several "stretching exercises," a summary of the chapter, and references specifically chosen for their applicability to the topic(s) covered in the chapter. In addition, many chapters also have example work created by Janesick's (2011) students, including excerpts from interview transcripts, photos and drawings to supplement observations, and personal reflections from students on their learning and skill development. One example of this can be seen in the numerous interview transcripts that Janesick includes as exemplars of varying concepts. These inserts should be helpful to beginning qualitative researchers, as they lay

groundwork regarding the types of observations and interactions that could be made and some ways of thinking about outcomes and synthesizing some of what is occurring. Indeed, Janesick discusses a range of issues essential to qualitative researchers making this book a good introduction to and overview of topics such as interviewing (i.e., Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), observation, journaling, and working with data. In addition, Janesick devotes about a quarter of this book to appendixes for her readers, which range in topic from an example syllabus for a course in qualitative research; to sample letters to participants and IRB documents; to electronic qualitative research resources; to “rules of thumb” for interviewing. New additions to this book include a focus on technology in research, and using the internet and related tools for qualitative inquiry and virtual data collection; several new exercises; and a demonstration of creating poetry from interview transcripts. “Found poetry,” (p. 167) as Janesick calls it, is a way of looking at data creatively, with the goal of finding bits and pieces that create a poetic representation of the essence of the transcript. Janesick has also increased the emphasis on building the writing habit and the analysis and interpretation of data in this edition.

The exercises in this book have been chosen to help you stretch yourself as a qualitative researcher and span a number of different domains, including observing, interviewing, writing, reflecting, and creating. One practice that Janesick (2011) seems especially emphatic about is that of writing a reflective journal. Journaling, says Janesick, is “a technique used in the arts . . . [which] helps in the journey to improve our research practice” (p. 161). She describes in detail a number of benefits to journaling, including the opportunity it presents to “evaluate our experiences, improve and clarify our thinking, and become better writers and scholars” (p. 161) and makes a strong argument for the use of a reflective journal as a way to triangulate data and document the researcher’s role. In addition to a few exercises to introduce the reader to journaling and consider how they can be helpful, Janesick also provides a brief overview of the research on journaling, techniques used to approach journaling, types of people who may find journaling especially useful, and some examples of journaling as it can be seen in everyday life and popular culture.

As a graduate student, the part of the book that I appreciated the most (although there were many that were very beneficial) was the discussion and step-by-step guide to data analysis. About this phase of the research project, Janesick (2011) says, “if these [previous] exercises represent the stretching in a dance class, analysis of data and interpretation and representation of data represent the floor exercises and performance stages of dance” (p. 175). While this is not the only book that broaches the topic of data analysis (see Rubin & Rubin, 2005 and Stake, 2010, for examples), it is one of the most helpful and straight-forward descriptions I have come across in my reading thus far. In this section, Janesick provides an outline of how one could begin to analyze his or her data, breaking the process down into “checkpoints” (p. 178) for analysis, interpretation, and reporting; what kinds of evidence should be used for analysis; and a step-by-step example of the data analysis and coding process.

This book is a good introduction for those who are in the beginning or intermediate stages of becoming qualitative researchers, as well as for anyone who wishes to practice creativity, observation, and inquiry and hone their habits of mind. While Janesick (2011) notes that many of her students come from education-based fields and, especially, teacher education, these exercises could be beneficial for many types of

research, including more-informal projects, such as teacher research or action research, or more-formalized research, including dissertation or thesis work. Janesick incorporates a wealth of well-written, valuable information throughout her chapters, covering topics ranging from what kinds of questions to ask in a literature review, to journaling, to analyzing and reporting data, to ethical and IRB issues, to one potential structure for a qualitative dissertation proposal. These sections should not be overlooked, as they are written clearly, concisely, and in a language that is very accessible. For those who are specifically looking to hone their skills, think critically, and be creative, this book will provide the groundwork to get you started and keep you moving. Additionally, this book seems best-suited to those who are able to use it in a class or small group setting, as many of the exercises include exchanging ideas and outcomes with others and reflecting on others' work. While these exercises certainly could be used individually, it is likely that the best outcomes would come from the back-and-forth sharing of ideas, insights, and approaches to these exercises. Thus, readers may want to locate someone to work alongside them, and to be their "stretching partner."

Overall, this book does an excellent job of supporting beginning and intermediate qualitative researchers who have questions about many of the stages, processes, and procedures that they will face and who want to sharpen themselves as a research instrument. This book was designed and updated to encourage the beginning or intermediate qualitative researcher to stretch, using a wide range of exercises and activities designed to develop a number of habits, essential to a successful qualitative researcher. These "habits of mind" include "observation habits, interview habits, writing habits, writing the researcher reflective journal habit, the narrative writing habit, the habits of analysis and interpretation, and the habit of writing poetry found in the interview transcripts [as well as] the creative and the collaborative habit" (Janesick, 2011, p. 1). In working through these exercises, reflecting, continuing to learning more about qualitative research, and practicing, the beginning or intermediate qualitative researcher will have the opportunity to stretch and practice, and continue to hone the skills that they depend on in their work. Publication information for this book can be found by following this link to the Sage website: <http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book233871?siteId=sage-us&prodTypes=any&q=janesick&pageTitle=productsSearch>

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