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International House  
109-111 Fulham Palace Road  
London W6 8JA  
United Kingdom

[hello@academicaudiotranscription.com](mailto:hello@academicaudiotranscription.com)

## Qualitative Open Mic: What Counts as Qualitative Research? Episode 1

### Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
- Ruth Cigman (Speaker) (Ruth)

[Start of recording]

[downtempo electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:10]

00:00:10 Sohail Hi. I'm Sohail Jannesari, a migrants' rights researcher and activist. At the Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre, mercifully shortened to QUAHRC, we aim to inspire debates on qualitative methods and practice. In this podcast series we talk to people in other fields, such as philosophy, film, and journalism, about the parallels and contrasts doing their work in qualitative research. In doing so, we hope to broaden and challenge understandings of what qualitative research is and can be. Today our guest is Ruth Cigman, a philosophy academic and a co-founder of The Cotton Tree Trust, a charity that works with migrants and refugees. She's a current trustee there. Ruth, would you like to introduce yourself?

00:01:06 Ruth Thanks Sohail. Well, for years and years I worked as an academic philosopher in various institutions. I was what was known as an applied philosopher. I was always very interested in—I was—I got involved with medical ethics, special education, educate—other kinds of education, and ethics generally. And I was always interested in the relationship between, if you like, theory and practice. Everyday life, and thinking about it, reflecting on it, and saying something of importance, hopefully; trying to. So that's my sort of—my academic background. And I've written a lot of articles and stuff, books, you know, in those sort of areas. Focusing quite a lot, as I say, on people, actually; people in different situations. I also started a charity with some other people in 2016, Cotton Tree Trust, which is for refugees and asylum seekers. And since then I've been very absorbed with that. It's been much more demanding than I ever imagined, even though we keep our numbers quite small. But we do engage with them very directly—our members—very directly, in terms of their everyday lives. And we try to do what we can for them in terms of the law, emotional support, social support, and these kinds of things. And because they're human beings, everything spills over into everything else. So that's really where most of my energies are directed, but I'm still an honorary research fellow at UCL, so I still get asked to do some things. I'm about to write an article on punishment in schools. But basically, most of my time I'm spending with The Cotton Tree.

00:02:47 Sohail Great, thanks. And how did your sort of academic work lead or link in to the work you're doing with The Cotton Tree Trust?

00:02:57 Ruth Well, as I said, I've always been interested in, really, the interface between thinking and relating to people. [chuckles] You know, how we think about people. And how we think about everyday life. And how we think about how we treat people well. That's really always been my basic concern, whatever the context. I think probably what kicked it all off, really, for me—that—the direction I went into with The Cotton Tree Trust—I started going in that direction, I think, probably at a conference in Edinburgh in about 2014. It was about wilderness education. And there were lots of teachers there who, being in Edinburgh, they took kids out to the Highlands. And they—you know, they were giving children experiences of nature. And it was really good. So I went to this conference about three days, and the first couple of days, or day and a half, it was quite interesting. But everybody was talking very theoretically, using theoretical concepts like

the learning continuum, the hierarchy of needs, and whatever it was. And I was involved, you know, and I was trying to kind of—you know, deal with these; it wasn't particularly my area. But I was trying to grasp the concepts that they were using. And—but—I think it was on the second day, I suddenly thought—and I put up my hand, actually, and I said, "This is all really interesting, but nobody's actually mentioned a child. And, you know, you've all been out on—in the Highlands with children, and I haven't heard any stories. I haven't heard about anything that's happened to any children, or—you know? And I wonder if there's some kind of aversion—some kind of attachment to theory, and an aversion to actually talking about children, and people, and teachers for that matter." And it caused a little bit of a stir. But that was really my realisation, that there's a lot more to philosophy than theory, and it needs to connect.

00:04:45 Sohail Great. And so you took that realisation and then—this was before you started the charity?

00:04:52 Ruth Yes. It was before.

00:04:53 Sohail So, walk me through the steps from the realisation to co-founding The Cotton Tree.

00:04:53 Ruth I mean, I then wrote an article on cherishing, [chuckles] which is a kind of an unusual concept. It's not one that's used by philosophers. And I used this really—I don't know if it was a mistake, because it's—for some people it has religious connotations, which it—for me, it doesn't. But it was about really being intimate with people, and really caring about people, and I used that word. I wrote an article about that. It got a—it was actually—yeah, in the context of teachers and children. And it got some interest, and I then got a book contract very shortly after that, for a book on cherishing. And so I spent three years really thinking about theory and practice, and how you can bring people into philosophy. And, you know, I've had—I've been in philosophy for a long time. I sometimes wonder why, because it can be a very dry subject. And I never wanted it to be that way. It never has been, really, for me. But I started exploring all this. During the course of writing that book, I happened to meet an asylum seeker. I was actually asked, with my husband, to host a refugee for Christmas. And this man was quite an amazing person, and had very extreme needs. And we spent quite a bit of time with him, on Christmas Day, driving, and you know, spending—whatever—during the day. And we listened to his story and we got—to cut a long story short, we started getting to know him very well. After that Christmas Day, we started inviting him around for meals, he came with his friend. And I started really thinking about the overall question that drove me in philosophy, about how you can really relate to people, engage with people, in a way that is two-way. It's not just me helping you, it's me learning from you, it's you learn—you helping me, you know. It's a human relationship. And that kind of came out of—you know, it was very timely for me, because I was thinking about cherishing. So they—obviously they fitted together, and I—as a result of meeting that man, it just became very clear that—and I had an opportunity to get some money to start a charity. And we started the charity, The Cotton Tree Trust, very much based on the idea of giving asylum seekers, refugees—whatever they're called—migrants, the time they need to really be human. So that then we weren't just treating them as clients and filling in forms for them. Really relating to them, and talking about our strengths and weaknesses as well as their—whatever that they were going through. So to me, it was a very natural evolution from, if you like, the wilderness conference to—you know, the stories that they were telling—to really trying to listen to human beings, and be listened to as well. Because they got to know us pretty well.

00:07:41 Sohail And how do you continue to bring some of that philosophy knowledge into Cotton Tree work?

00:07:49 Ruth I mean, I'm involved in a weekly workshop, which we call Heal and Grow. And it involves being really attentive to the people in the group, the members in the group—we have some volunteers as well. We're all very much equals, you know. It's actually led now by the asylum seeker that we met in 2015, that—he now actually facilitates this group. And I support him. You know, we think about concepts sometimes. We think

about, what is love? What is trust? What is friendship? What is justice? But it's always very much in the context of their lives and what's happening to them. It could be their daily lives, their—what's happened this morning, or what's happening with the Home Office, or what's—the fact they've been waiting for ten years, or whatever it is. So we're always trying to interconnect, you know, thinking about [chuckles] you know, about the feeling of being betrayed, for example, and how that relates to being distrustful. To the concept, and their lives; we're always kind of connecting these things.

00:08:57 Sohail        Yeah, that's really interesting. And... so how—so do you think that talking about these philosophical concepts helps people's mental health?

00:09:10 Ruth         Absolutely, yes. I think, you know, if you take a concept like justice. I mean—and—you know, asylum seekers, people who come here and seek asylum, they've been thinking about justice. They may not have been pinning it on that word, but they've been treated badly. They've been abused, and they've been feeling this—if you like, the sting of injustice. What we do is we bring that out, and it gives them a kind of platform, if you like. They listen to other people's stories, they tell their stories, and they think about—it helps them to think about why justice matters. It helps them to think about why justice is something they're entitled to, you know? Instead of just feeling abused, they feel there's something here that every human being is entitled to. That everybody—every human being is entitled to be treated decently and well. And it—I think it just gives them a sense of solidarity with other people, a sense of community, and a sense of being able to really bring certain thoughts and feelings, which have been probably quite buried, because they've been so traumatised—they come to the surface and they talk about them. I suppose it's a little bit like if you—it has some overlap with what was called the talking cure, you know, by Freud. That if you talk about something, and you're listened to, and you listen to others, it brings about a kind of healing. And I've seen this over the years that we've been running The Cotton Tree. And people, they say to us, "Yes, I feel a lot better, just for talking about that and being heard."

00:10:41 Sohail        Thank you, that's very interesting. So, I just wanted to come back to something which we talked about before we started recording, around this difference between applying your philosophical practice, and locate—you know, trying to explain practice through philosophy. I think—I mean, you can tell me better and explain to me better, but can you just think—can you talk to that idea, and place it in the context of the work with Cotton Tree?

00:11:10 Ruth         Sure.

00:11:10 Sohail        So how—so you're not applying your philosophy, but you are...? [chuckles]

00:11:13 Ruth         [chuckles] Okay. Really, it's—this is not my idea. I mean, it comes basically from Aristotle, so it's very, very ancient. Aristotle—I mean, he was—and he was quite radical in this way. He said, "You start from where you are." You start from your life. And what you then do is you try to articulate and clarify and ask questions about what you know from your own life, what you experience in your own life. Now, one of the things we experience, and this is obviously—this obviously connects immediately with The Cotton Tree—is we know that some people are treated badly. Some people are abused. We know the difference between good and bad treatment. Sometimes there may be a grey area in between, but if we start from where we are, in Aristotle's sense, we know that—you know, we start off from decent treatment and not-so-decent treatment, or abuse. And then in philosophy, what I've always wanted to do is articulate that, and talk about, "Well, what is decent treatment? What is a decent society?" What is this—we recognise it, and—but we want to make it more explicit. We want to articulate, we want to describe it, we want to just, you know, talk—more describing, actually. It's about describing, rather than trying to theorise. So I've always considered myself a bit of an anti-theoretical philosopher. I think Aristotle was in a way, as well. Wittgenstein, in the twentieth century, was very much anti-theory. In a way, it brings philosophy home. And for—Wittgenstein often talked about bringing philosophy home, coming

back to where you are, very much like Aristotle. I think, you know, in The Cotton Tree, we recognise—we try to observe, and listen, and see what's happening, and see when—you know, it happens in any community. Sometimes people are not treating each other well, sometimes they're treating each other very well, they're being kind, they're being unkind, and we try to make this explicit. We try to make things explicit so that people can really get to grips with, you know, what's happening, instead of it being rather subterranean. I don't know if that makes sense?

00:13:21 Sohail Yeah. That makes sense. It would be good to unpack a bit.

00:13:25 Ruth Mm.

00:13:26 Sohail So, what you are trying to do is describe what a decent society looks like using—or... building on actual experience. So it is that that you try and focus on, the positive—

00:13:44 Ruth Yeah.

00:13:44 Sohail —sides of experience, and then bring that out? Or—yeah, if you could—

00:13:49 Ruth Yes.

00:13:49 Sohail —I guess, describe the method of how you get to this description.

00:13:53 Ruth Okay. I think one way that—one thing that might help to explain this: there's a philosopher that I really like, an Israeli philosopher, who makes a distinction between what he calls i.e. philosophy and e.g. philosophy. Now, i.e. philosophy can be—it's basically—it explicates. You know, when you say, "i.e.," in a sentence, you're kind of explicating what you've just said. E.g. philosophy involves giving examples. And so it takes you straight into life. And he says there are two different kinds of philosophical temperaments. There are philosophers who really want to go into everyday life, they're e.g. philosophers, and there are i.e. philosophers who want to explicate all the time, and define, and all that kind of thing. I see this all the time with philosophers; you know, that there are these two different temperaments. I'm very much an e.g. philosopher. I always have wanted good examples, like in the case of the wilderness education. I think you have to talk about people to support your argument, to support what you're saying. You—of course you define words, and of course you explicate, but you can't just do that, because then it just becomes like a closed circle. It becomes arid. If you've got the real examples, and you try to impress people with those examples. "Look at what's happened here." We can talk about this in The Cotton Tree. Look at this example of somebody who, you know—an asylum seeker who's maybe abused our services, or whatever it is. So you're constantly referring to people, bringing up examples. I call this populated philosophy; you've got people right at the heart of it. So you're trying to use language well, you're trying to explicate things, you're trying to use language—words clearly. But you're always referring to the human situations.

00:15:39 Sohail And so is it about being convincing and providing richness to your arguments, or is there something more in e.g. philosophy?

00:15:50 Ruth It is about those things. It's also about taking the time it takes, you know? I think it means that sometimes you're—you have to be much more at leisure. And this is something that we have in The Cotton Tree and also in philosophy. You know, sometimes it takes quite a while to kind of unpack an idea, like we're trying to do right now, you know? You can't necessarily say, "Well, we've got a twenty-minute slot, and we need to just define a word." I think there's a lot of this—the assumption that you can define words really quite quickly. You can understand them quite quickly. Another philosopher that I like very much—and again, this might help to explain more of what I'm saying. Iris Murdoch was a very good philosopher. I don't think she was such a great novelist, personally, but she was a very good philosopher. And one thing she said is that we always have to be trying to deepen our concepts. So we have an idea of love, or happiness, or whatever it is. We always have to be trying to go deeper with this. And

we do it by reference to life. We do it in the e.g. style, you know? Because we really want to come to, what is love? You know? One could say, "What is mental health?" What do these things really mean? And we do this by taking—giving it the time that it takes, and having dialogues. Dialogue is very important in philosophy. You know, you go back and forth, and you try to be clearer. You try to understand the other person's queries, like I'm trying to understand yours now, you know? And it—in some ways, it's not what people think of as theory, because theory involves coming to some quite clear conclusions.

00:17:27 Sohail And how do you promote dialogue? How do you facilitate it? What's your style? How do you get people talking about quite, you know, initially abstract issues? I know that you provide examples, but how do you encourage this conversation?

00:17:42 Ruth Do you mean in academic contexts, or in Cotton Tree?

00:17:45 Sohail For instance, in The Cotton Tree—

00:17:46 Ruth Yeah. Yeah.

00:17:47 Sohail —which it sounds like what you described as what you do in your wellbeing workshops.

00:17:49 Ruth Yeah, yeah. Yes, yes. Absolutely. So, we've got various ways of trying to get the conversation going. I mean, one thing that we've done quite successfully is get a piece of—a long piece of lining paper. It's like what's used underneath wallpaper. And it goes along a table—a long table. You have the group around this. You have a bunch of felt pens, different colours. You have some—maybe some clay. And you start off the session just throwing out a question. You know, it could be anything. Somebody—yeah, you know... it's quite an abstract question, if you like. You know, it could be about justice, it could be about love, or it could just be something that's happened to somebody. It doesn't really matter, actually. But you follow this question. And you—while you're following it, you're drawing, you're moulding clay, and you get deeper, in the Iris Murdoch sense. You get deeper into the question, and it becomes not abstract, although the abstraction is still there, because you're still thinking about love, or you're still thinking about justice. But you're giving examples all the time, and people are thinking about their lives, and they're feeling, you know? They're feeling the sting of injustice; they're not just talking about analysis of justice. And so we have really good conversations in The Cotton Tree. And I think it's the same, actually, in a philosophy seminar. You—you know, if you give people an opportunity to really sit down and follow the conversation, follow the path, you don't know quite where it's going to lead.

00:19:20 Sohail And do you—so, this wallpaper lining—[chuckles]

00:19:25 Ruth [chuckling] Yeah.

00:19:25 Sohail —is it literal or...? [chuckles]

00:19:27 Ruth Yeah.

00:19:27 Sohail How is that used? So do people write, I suppose?

00:19:29 Ruth Yeah.

00:19:30 Sohail Okay.

00:19:30 Ruth Yeah, yeah. We started this off with a quotation from Paul Klee, the artist, who said, "Drawing is taking a line for a walk." So we started this—we had—so somebody would start a line with a felt pen, and then somebody else would take the felt pen and take the line a bit further. And this was kind of the model that we're kind of together. We're taking something for a walk, but we're doing it with—we're doing it with the line, and—but we're also doing it with questions, you know? So I throw out a question, and then

you take up the question, and somebody else may take up the question in a different way. And we pass it around. And this is the way we get deeper into our understanding, into, you know, these kind of implicit aspects of our lives that I was talking about before. You know, somebody who's suffered from injustice. But not analyse the word, "Justice." But you start thinking about this in a way that is—can really be very calming.

00:20:25 Sohail Great. Apologies if I'm fixated on this, like, pen activity. [chuckles]

00:20:29 Ruth [chuckles] Ah, yeah.

00:20:30 Sohail So just—I just want to get my head around it.

00:20:32 Ruth Yeah.

00:20:32 Sohail Does someone... do they, while they're talking, draw this line which connects to the previous person's line? And do they—is it just line? Is there more to it? Is there—and why does that help people—

00:20:46 Ruth Yeah.

00:20:47 Sohail —connect and talk?

00:20:49 Ruth Okay, you start seeing things emerging. For example, the line. Somebody may take the pen and turn the line into a spiral. You know? And then you can think about—and then people start—they notice that. They might say, "Why did you do a spiral there?" And we might then pause and think about, maybe—you know, because that person feels very stuck in—their lives are like a circle, and then it's not going anywhere. They're going more and more inside themselves and not out into the life that they want to lead. And you know—so what happens is shapes emerge. You talk about them, you comment on them. And you do that in—you know, in a way that connects up. "Oh, well I did that because, yes, I was thinking about this," or, "I was thinking about that," or I was feeling really hurt by something that's happened," or whatever.

00:21:41 Sohail Yes, that makes a lot of sense. And so I know also that you do clay workshops.

00:21:46 Ruth Mm.

00:21:47 Sohail So does this draw on a similar idea of, you know, facilitating these conversations using examples around deep philosophical issues?

00:22:00 Ruth Yes. I mean, clay is very interesting because—well, clay, when it's fired, is really, really fragile. You have to be careful not to drop it. But when it's not fired, it's really, really sturdy. So we have all sorts of conversations about clay itself, and how it relates to being fragile and being strong, you know? But then we—somebody might make a clay figure, a simple clay figure. And they put it down, and the head falls off. And then you start talking about how fragile we are. You know? So, again, we're using these kind of—you know, we're using our hands, we're looking at objects, we're moulding objects, we're looking at the shapes that are emerging. We're doing all these things. It gives us something to look at, it gives us something to focus on. And actually, I was doing this with an art psychotherapist who was—who had more training than I do—obviously, because I'm not a therapist—in, actually, you know, talking about the meaning of the marks that people make, or the clay that people mould, or whatever it is. But I—so I was—I was more on the side of, you know, the meaning of words, and how it goes deep into their lives. But we were also looking at the feelings that were coming up, and that—you know, the way they were expressed through felt pens, or whatever is it, or clay.

00:23:17 Sohail Fascinating. And do you take what people have said—is there—does it just live in this session you create? Does it continue afterwards, these conversations? Is there anything that people bring back with them so that, you know, it records what happens?

- 00:23:37 Ruth Well, we have a WhatsApp group, which is twenty-four-seven. Anybody can post anything on there, as long as it's not something abusive. So we post the photos. We—I mean, we take photos of this—of whatever emerges. And yes, then there's—the conversation can continue. It doesn't always; sometimes it does. Somebody might say, "Yeah, I was a bit upset about this," or, "I was a bit puzzled about that," or, you know, or, "Today something reminded me," or whatever it is. So yes, we keep in touch between workshops, or sessions, or whatever.
- 00:24:14 Sohail Great. And then I was also thinking—say you have a session about justice, and what justice means. Do you then, at the end of the session, have a summary? A way of bringing everything together? A... not a conclusion, I know it's an ongoing conversation, but you know, something to... yeah.
- 00:24:38 Ruth Sometimes—I mean, it's done differently at different times. At the moment—yes. At the moment it's being facilitated, as I say, by an asylum seeker who's actually really, really good at summing up what people are saying. It may not happen at the end of the session. Quite often, we listen for quite a while to somebody talking, and then actually he is really, really good at saying, "Ah, that really struck me, because I think you were saying this, and that relates to when I was on the streets," you know, "When I was in mass accommodation," or whatever. So there's a lot of summarising going on. Another person may say, "Were you saying this, or were you saying that?" I mean, I did that as well, and I still do it, because I'm still present. But you know, I wouldn't say necessarily we come to the end at—maybe as you do in a seminar, and say, "Right, these are the takeaway—take home points." We don't necessarily do that. But that may happen on the WhatsApp group, you know? You know, sometimes I would summarise, or somebody would summarise some of the key points.
- 00:25:35 Sohail And how do you manage conflicting accounts and versions of, for instance, justice? Do you try and bring people together? Is it a thing about trying to create some sort of consensus in the group, or?
- 00:25:51 Ruth No, no. We don't try to create—what we try to do is get people to listen to each other, and to understand where each—other people are coming from. You know, we've had—for example, we've had a topic recently about what you might call empowerment. You know, obviously this is a very big issue. People feel disempowered routinely by the Home Office. We had a woman who's actually got her papers, and who has built—gone from strength to strength. And she was talking about, you know, finding your voice, and speaking out, and how she—and you can see, she's a really strong person now and she's now working in the NHS and she's kind of—you know, she's got her life on track. And some people were sitting there listening, and saying, "Yes, but—," eventually they said, because they were rather overawed by her, "I don't have that confidence," and, "I don't know how to do that," and, "I don't have a voice." So we had to then talk about this. We didn't say, "Oh yes, you do. Oh yes, you must speak out." We think about why she feels she doesn't have a voice. We try to give her some encouragement in terms of, you know, "You're maybe at the beginning of the journey now, and you're confidence is rock bottom, but that is often the case for human beings generally. Particularly asylum seekers. It builds up, it grows over time. A bit like a cotton tree, if you like. So, you know, you may feel at the moment that you can't speak out, you're scared, you're—and that's fine. That's how you are. You're different from this other woman. But you know, over time, that can change." So we had that discussion. People are—we absolutely endorse differences. And nobody's trying to say, "We must all agree about everything."
- 00:27:31 Sohail So we were talking a bit about some of the issues with qualitative research, particularly around one-off interviews or research which doesn't have a sustained period of engagement with the people they're working with. So could you tell me a bit more about that, and how your sort of philosophy leads into a critique of this?



00:27:55 Ruth

Yeah, I'll try. So, I mean, I like qualitative research. I think it's very good to listen to people in a kind of unstructured way, which I think is what happens in qualitative research. And without trying to quantify everything that they're saying, or what the mental health is at the—behind it. I do have some concerns about what you might call the kind of time-slice approach. Because what happens, as I understand it—I mean, I'm not a qualitative researcher. I don't know that much about it. But, you know, you have a conversation, let's say. Not an interview, but a conversation. It's a slice of time, and the person will say a few things, and you'll record those things, and you'll have a chat with that person and feedback and whatever. But I think that it can be misleading, as I understand it. And if you're really thinking about putting people at the heart of your thinking about mental health, or whatever it is, a time-slice may not be enough. So I can—if you like, I can give you a couple of examples from my experience with The Cotton Tree where this could feed into what I'm saying just now and maybe illustrate it in a certain way. So we have two women. I'm going to slightly disguise them, obviously, but two women who—with huge differences between them, but two asylum seekers. And the first one I'm going to call Danny, and the second one I'm going to call Carmen. And I'll just read you very briefly a couple of—a few lines, very—about these women. And then some of the conclusions that we came to around them. So Danny, to start with, is a dynamic young African woman. She makes her own clothes, she always looks fantastic, and she's always, always furious with the Home Office for the way they treat her and, of course, other asylum seekers. She deals with this by writing letters of protest all over the place—to the Home Office, to her MP, to all—you know, to all sorts of organisations. She also goes around—she's really, really street-wise. She knows—and you know, organisation-wise, she knows where to find the best food and the best clothes and the best meals and whatever. And she's also very good at directing our members. So one of the things she said very clearly to us was, "I want to help people in my position to have a dignified life." So she was with us for quite a while, and in the first few months we thought, "Fantastic." You know? What more could you want, really, of an asylum seeker? Okay. I'm going to just go on to the second person, Carmen. She thinks she's rubbish. Okay? Low self-esteem, if you like. She hates her accommodation, she hates the people she's forced to share it with. She hardly goes out. But she does occasionally come to our Heal and Grow meetings, but she's very quiet and she's very sulky. And on one occasion, somebody tried to draw her out, because she wasn't saying anything, and she said, "What's the point of Heal and Grow meetings? My life is worthless." So you've got a couple of little quotations from these two women. And if you think about just a little snapshot—I've just given you little snapshots of these people. If I were to ask you the question, "Who has better mental health?" I think it's kind of a no-brainer. Right? [chuckles] Nobody would say that the one who is silent and depressed and her life is worthless and blah blah blah has better mental health. Everybody would say Danny has better mental health, because she's resilient and resourceful and she wants a dignified life and she wants to help others. But, in fact, there was more to it than that. And that's really what I'm trying to get at when I talk about perhaps some of the limitations of qualitative research. So as a result of working with these people and being with these people, these two women, over months and years, really, we got much more than a time-slice, obviously. And we learned some things that were very surprising. First of all, Danny. Yes, she was—she was very into self-empowerment and she—I'll just give you one or two examples of how she behaved during COVID, during lockdown. She was put into a very small room in a hotel, very derelict, very horrible. Horrible food, practically inedible. And she protested and she talked to the management and she wrote letters of protest and blah blah. And she was supposed to be there for twenty-three hours a day, but we had given her some paint to occupy her. We do this with our members—or we did it particularly during lockdown. She started painting not on the paper that we'd given her, but on the walls of the hotel; of her room. And she sent me photos of these, and her paintings became more and more elaborate. They became more and more full of insults, and swear words, and all sorts of things about the Home Office and the management and blah blah blah. So she was really letting off steam. She was—you know, she was showing that she had power, actually. This is the only way she could use it. She was also—she was told to stay there for twenty-three hours a day as this happened, you know, at this time of lockdown. She decided to just ignore that on one occasion, just go

and sleep in the park. She kind of called their bluff. And in fact, you know, they didn't kick her out; technically they should've done. Anyway. So this is how she behaved. And as we saw her behaviour becoming more extreme, in The Cotton Tree, we became a little bit concerned. Some people thought, "Yes, this is really good to paint on the walls," other people were rather concerned about it and thought she was going too far and she's behaving like a hooligan and we shouldn't really have somebody in The Cotton Tree who's behaviour—who's, you know, whatever. So there was discussion and debate and we talked to her a lot on WhatsApp and blah blah blah. So... yeah. What happened was she became more defiant over time. She became more angry. And she became angry with us. And this was something that took us by surprise, initially. We were giving food vouchers to our members during lockdown because—particularly to people in hotels, who get absolute rubbish to eat. She wasn't happy with food vouchers, she demanded cash. And she said, "I don't—," you know, "I don't want food vouchers, I don't want to go to Tesco's, I can't get what I need at Tesco's. I want cash and I want to go to the health stores, and I want to be healthy." Things that sound really good. But we couldn't give her cash, because we—this money came from a funder who said, "No cash; you have to give food vouchers." She wouldn't accept that. And she became more and more angry with us. She started accusing us of being the Home Office, or being in cahoots with the Home Office. And she—one of the things she said—apart from all sorts of abuse, which started being directed towards us—she said, "I don't take no for an answer." And then we started having real problems. Because in life, you have to sometimes take no for an answer. You can't have everything your own way, obviously. So this started becoming quite a big problem. So I'll just continue her story a little bit. Well, what happened was, the staff and the volunteers and the people who knew her well got together. We didn't know what to do. We really, really were very fond of her. We wanted to accommodate her. We don't—we never, never like to exclude people. We only do it when it really, really gets to an extreme point where we just can't handle it. And it did get to this point. And so, eventually, we referred her to a mental health charity, and we came to the conclusion that she was—she was not working through her trauma in the way that one needs to when—and she had a very traumatic background. Instead, she was trying to cover it up. She was very much in denial. She was basically saying, you know, "I am powerful. I refuse to be—to submit to these things," in a way which was to some degree healthy, but it went beyond that. And so we came to the conclusion that, actually, she was not mentally healthy. In fact she was really quite, you know, impossible for us to deal with. She needed a kind of expertise that we couldn't offer. The other woman, Carmen, who we—who was very depressed, who was very isolated, very angry—we realised that she was actually going through a process. She was really thinking about what had happened to her, her traumatic experiences. And they were really bad, and they involved, you know, her family being murdered and her being—almost being murdered and escaping and all this. And she was very understandably depressed about that. The conclusion we came to about her was that it—we weren't quite clear. Although initially she seemed very mentally—she seemed unhealthy, mentally—mentally ill, or whatever. We became less and less sure that that was actually the right way to see her. And we started thinking, "Well, why shouldn't she be depressed? Why shouldn't she grieve?" You know? She's grieving. This woman is grieving. Do we call somebody who's grieving, in very understandable circumstances, mentally ill? You know? Somebody who says things like, "My life is not worth living," that's a time-slice. But, in fact, when you look at the picture over two years, what we could see was that her grief was being worked through. And in fact, what happened to her was that she gradually emerged. I mean, not—obviously not totally; nobody's going to emerge from what she'd been through. But she started to become—she—more independent. You know, in terms of seeing that she could have a life, and that everything was not—and that she wasn't rubbish. And that she was a worthwhile person. And that she could do, you know, worthwhile work. And she—and then she really started hoping to get her papers, and we were trying to help her to do that. So the initial impression we had, that, you know, Danny was the healthy one, and Carmen was really not, that was based on rather short periods of time—exposure to them, if you like. Over longer periods of time, the picture changed very, very dramatically, and it really reversed. So this was—you know, this is really to talk about—to say more about putting a person in the picture. And people

occupy time, you know? They evolve through time; things change through time. And it can be—it can be hard and misleading to say, you know, “We’ve had a conversation with this person, and we now judge that their mental health is poor or is good as a consequence of that.”

00:37:33 Sohail Great, thank you. That’s—yeah, that’s fascinating. I think that was all the questions I had, but, you know, is there anything else you want to add about, you know, this process you go through of bringing your philosophy to the work you’re doing? Or anything else, really.

00:37:57 Ruth Mm. Mm. I suppose, no. I think it’s just an ongoing kind of... mission, or orientation, where, you know, I think a lot of people think that i.e. styles of thinking—it doesn’t—not necessarily philosophy, but i.e. styles of thinking, where you’re defining words, you have to be clear about the meanings of words. I often find that’s not helpful, and I often chip in and say, “Well, you may have a definition, but do you know what your definition means? Do you know how that definition actually plays out in people’s lives?” You know? So that’s a kind of ongoing dialogue that I have with people—I mean, it can be in any context at all. Because actually, when we talk about e.g. and i.e., it’s not just about philosophy or academia, it’s about people trying to understand all sorts; it’s in politics, it’s all over the place. So, yeah. I just—I think my orientation is towards bringing people back and getting them to look at the human world as closely as possible. And understanding that we’re not going to see it very clearly all the time. Sometimes we’re going to miss things, and that’s just how it is.

00:39:06 Sohail Wonderful. And finally, how can we follow your work? Inside of academia, outside of academia, and if people want to follow up on some of the things you’ve been saying, what’s the best avenue?

00:39:21 Ruth Okay. Thank you. Well, to tell you the truth, I’ve been so busy with The Cotton Tree in the last few years, I haven’t yet made myself a website, which I must do. And I must post some stuff there. I mean, you know, I’ve got a UCL email address and I’ve got a Cotton Tree email address, and stuff is on Google, obviously. So if you’ve got the right spelling, you’ll—fortunately, I’m the only person in—practically in the world, I think—who spells their name the way I do. [chuckles] So it kind of comes up in—on Google. And one day I’ll have a website.

00:39:53 Sohail How is your name spelled?

00:39:55 Ruth Okay. Ruth, I think you know. The second name is spelled with a C. That’s—I always have to emphasise that, because it’s Cigman, and people write S. They hear it and they write S. And I say, “No, it’s C. It’s C.” So it’s like cigarette, C-I-G, and then man, M-A-N.

00:40:11 Sohail Yeah, I think Freud might have ruined that for you.

00:40:13 Ruth [laughs] Yes, I think he did.

00:40:16 Sohail Great, well that’s everything. Thank you so much.

00:40:18 Ruth Okay.

00:40:18 Sohail That was really fascinating, and... yes. As Ruth said, there’s lots of ways to follow her work, and thank you so much.

00:40:28 Ruth Thank you Sohail. Cheers.

[End of recording]