Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
- Dr Michelle O'Reilly (Speaker) (Michelle)

Qualitative Conundrums Episode 2: Quality with Michelle O'Reilly

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

00:00:10 Sohail	Hi. I'm Sohail Jannesari, a migration researcher and activist. I'm here to welcome you to Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre's podcast series called *Qualitative Conundrums*. Qualitative research always brings up a lot of questions for researchers. "How many people should I talk to? How should I interpret what they say? Do themes emerge or they actively created?" At the Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre, mercifully shortened to QUAHRC, we aim to make space for these debates, and this series is all about tackling fundamental qualitative conundrums. We will speak to esteemed academics who will offer their expert opinions on how you can solve the questions that plague your qualitative research. Today we're very lucky to have with us Dr Michelle O'Reilly. Michelle, would you like to introduce yourself?
00:01:09 Michelle	Yes, certainly. Thank you. Hello. I'm Dr Michelle O'Reilly. I work at the University of Leicester as an associate professor of communication and mental health, and a chartered psychologist in health. And I also work for Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust as a research consultant and quality improvement advisor.
00:01:27 Sohail	Great, thank you. And today we're going to be talking about quality in qualitative research, which sounds pretty fundamental. So, I'm going to start with a broad, perhaps kind of obvious question. But why is it important to think about quality in qualitative research?
00:01:45 Michelle	There are lots of reasons why it's important to think about quality in qualitative research, but I guess one of the fundamental contemporary reasons, really, is about competitiveness. So most people who undertake qualitative research either work in some area of practice or they're academic, but either way, what they have to demonstrate is that their research is done well, that it has meaning. And for many researchers in the modern day, that it can be applied to real world settings so that it has some applicability so that recommendations can be made. But if the methodology or the methods or the process is fundamentally flawed in some way, then the meaning of those findings that come out of that project are going to be less useful in an applied setting, and they'll be picked apart by critics. So competitively for funding, for publications, for acceptance and as a useful form of evidence. Actually attending to quality indicators and recognising the ways in which we can put together a robust project that adheres to the very kind of main indicators of quality around that methodological approach will actually help to make qualitative paradigms more competitive in the future and more accepted by critics.
00:03:04 Sohail	So just to clarify, what are we competing with?
00:03:07 Michelle	So we're competing with—well, for funding, you are competing with the big quantitative studies, particularly. So we know that quantitative research tends to attract more funding because it's outcomes-driven rather than process-driven. And all academics are expected to compete for funding and demonstrate that their research is valuable in an economic way. And so therefore, when you put in an application that's wholly qualitative, you have to demonstrate to those funding bodies and the reviewers of those funding applications that your project is worth the money. And one of the ways to do that is to demonstrate that what is produced from that project is high quality.
00:03:47 Sohail	I'm kind of curious about this focus on application. So you were saying that quality is about how much it reflects and can be applied to and is meaningful for real world circumstances. So what about theory? What about other, sort of, ways of thinking

about research? It seems, you know, that other things might be important to quality too.

00:04:14 Michelle	Absolutely. I mean, qualitative research is really rich and heterogeneous. We know this. One of the really exciting things about the qualitative paradigm is the range of theories that inform the different methodologies and the different ways in which qualitative research can be done. So absolutely quality in theory. And I guess one of the big issues we see with student projects is that there isn't always that congruence between their theoretical understanding of a qualitative piece of work, the methodology that they adopt, and the methods that they choose, and the way in which they disseminate that knowledge afterwards. And so you do have to connect the dots when you're doing good qualitative work.
00:04:52 Sohail	And so picking up on that, I know that you wrote a relatively recent editorial. I would say quite recent. It's this year.
00:05:00 Michelle	Yeah. [chuckles]
00:05:01 Sohail	Around approaches to quality and qualitative research. And you seem to be saying that we have to recognise and accept this heterogeneity and maybe have different quality assurance processes for different methods. Can you talk a bit more about that?
00:05:19 Michelle	Absolutely. And I guess I would preface this by saying this is a perspective and it's our perspective. Jessica Lester and I wrote this editorial, and we put together the special issue. And it's our perspective that actually different kinds of qualitative approaches, different kinds of qualitative methodologies, they don't all adhere to the same universal set of quality markers. And I would recommend that students read more about this because there are other scholars out there who would take issue with that particular perspective and disagree with us. So it's quite important that a student can understand the different sides of the argument. However, from our point of view, and the reason why we put that special issue together, is the methodologies that are available to qualitative research are different. So, you know, that they have different theoretical frameworks, and that's something we've already alluded to today already, but they also use different methodological approaches. They use different kinds of methods to collect their data. They have different belief systems around the positionality of the researcher, and they do different kinds of analytic techniques. So for us, a single set of universal markers cannot legitimately apply to all of that different diversity within one single paradigm. So we put the qualitative paradigm together as if it's a single entity, but of course it isn't. Not in the same way that quantitative tends to get pushed together in a single paradigm. Within the qualitative paradigm you have a huge range of diversity and heterogeneity, lots of different perspectives and ideas, a huge range of epistemological positions, lots of different ways of collecting data and analysing it. And that has to be accounted for in terms of how you do the project and the quality markers that you adhere to in doing so. And so we did the special issue to kind of demonstrate that and celebrate that diversity within a paradigm.
00:07:07 Sohail	Grand. So, quality and how you assess it might depend on the beliefs you bring to the method and your research approach. Which makes me think, does quality perhaps not just depend on your method and your philosophical beliefs but also the culture you are working in? Are there different things which—especially if you're thinking about applying applied research as a marker of quality, like perhaps different things are important in different places. So how does culture play into this?
00:07:41 Michelle	So culture of course plays a role. It's not so much about the quality indicators, it's more about their implementation. So one of the things we need to consider when we're applying quality markers to our work is how they're implemented in practice, and in the practice of doing the research, is what I mean. And so your cultural position will affect your positionality and your reflexivity as a researcher. It might also shape the way in which you go out and collect your data. So again, we can't treat things as monolithic or static. So, a focus group; we often think of it as being a singular method of data collection. And of course there are markers of how to do a good focus group, but the

implementation of the focus group schedule, the design of the focus group, the way in which it's run is inevitably going to be influenced by the culture of the researcher and the culture of the participants, but also the expectations and goals of the focus group and the topic of the focus group and various—all sorts of other things. So it can still be a really good focus group even if it's run quite differently to another good focus group. But what matters is the core indicators and how that plays out in practice. But of course, positionality and reflexivity are celebrated in qualitative research, so of course those things are going to shape the way in which any kind of method is implemented.

00:09:05 Sohail   And on positionality and reflexivity, it'd be great if you could give a very, very quick definition of them. And then maybe…. [chuckles]

00:09:13 Michelle   Yeah.

00:09:14 Sohail   It's a tough ask but we're a podcast.

00:09:17 Michelle   [laughs] Yes. Researchers have been grappling with that for a long time. [laughs]

00:09:23 Sohail   And then on top of that, I would like you to sort of tell us a bit about how that might relate to quality.

00:09:30 Michelle   Yeah. So trying to summarise two huge concepts in, like, twenty seconds for a podcast of course is going to not do justice to either concept, but just for the sake of simplicity. So positionality is the position one takes within research. So you might come at a piece of work as a feminist, for example. Just as a simple example. And so therefore your feminist ideology is going to shape the way in which you ask your questions. It's going to shape the way in which you do your analysis. And accepting that kind of position that you are taking on the project before you start and how it infiltrates the whole project will be really important. So reflexivity, it has some similarities with positionality, in the sense that this is how you reflect and take account of the way in which your position as a researcher might have shaped the research. So you reflect on how—who you are as a person as a woman, as a middle aged woman as I am, how that might have shaped and influenced my motivation to undertake the project. How it might have shaped the way I did the project. And so the example I usually give for this is, I did my PhD a fair few years ago in family therapy and on mental health, and that was shaped and influenced by the fact that I've got an autistic brother. And so I already knew a huge amount about mental health and services from a very personal experiential point of view, but not an academic one, and so doing the PhD bridged the personal and the academic. But acknowledging that and recognising how that might have shaped what I picked out of the analysis and what I saw as important in the analysis was part of that reflexive process.

00:11:06 Sohail   And presumably part of why it's important to have that if you're trying to do good quality work?

00:11:14 Michelle   Absolutely. Yes. Recognising that there are certain things that you might have pulled out of the data or seen as important in the data that someone else might not have seen as so important, is part of that reflexive process. And of course, it impacts on those issues around cherry picking data and showcasing bits of data. Qualitative projects are huge. The data sets are usually huge. You can't disseminate everything, so you—it's automatically a selective process.

00:11:39 Sohail   Yeah. That selective process really kills me—

00:11:43 Michelle   [laughs]

00:11:43 Sohail   —but it's really key. I wanted to ask you about how we can really describe the work we're doing in a detailed and transparent way. Because as far as I understand, transparency about methodology is a marker of quality.

00:12:07 Michelle   Mhm.

00:12:08 Sohail	But when I'm doing qualitative research, there's only so far I can break it down until it just becomes something which happened in my head. So, am I not doing enough to really think through my steps or is there a limit to how much I can describe to you for process of doing the research?
00:12:34 Michelle	It's always going to be limited. Of course it is. So one of the important things about transparency is that you are transparent during the process of undertaking the research, in your reflexive memos, in your diary taking, in your note taking. It's essential that you capture everything as you go along so that you are not relying on your memory when you get to the end of the project of what you think you did, because you'll never remember what you think you did. It will never be as accurate as if you're writing as you go along. Inevitably, in dissemination, a lot of that is going to get lost to the external audience. And that's a real shame. But again, it partly depends on who your audience is. So I've written journal articles that are small as three and a half thousand words for kind of medical style journals. And unfortunately, certain kinds of audiences are less interested in the processual aspect of a qualitative project, and they're more interested in the findings and the meaning of those findings. Now, as long as you have managed to do a high-quality project, then what you are reporting will still be high quality. But of course it inevitably misses out some of that detail because three and a half thousand words, you are not going to able to put that in. Of course not. Some of the longer more qualitatively oriented journals, however, are eight or nine thousand words, and so there is some scope for more of that procedural detailing methodology, for some of that reflexivity in the way you shape your discussion, for some of that transparency to—kind of to leak through the introduction, the method, the findings and the discussion section of the paper. So that a reader can start to see the process of how those decisions were made, why they were made and how that conforms to the methodology framework that you are following. So—and of course then you have other mechanisms as well, like podcasts, and you have conference presentations. And, again, depending on who your audience is, some audiences are much more interested in that whole reflection on a process than other audiences. And you need to make that judgment about who is going to benefit from that story and who actually just needs the, kind of, basic findings from the project.
00:14:38 Sohail	So am I getting it right that there's a difference here between quality in your research process and perhaps quality in the research dissemination?
00:14:50 Michelle	You should always have quality in the process. You should do a good quality project that conforms to the indicators for that particular methodological approach. Because then whatever you are reporting, you can be secure in the knowledge that you've done it to the right high standard, and you can say that it's been done to that high standard. Even if you don't give the audience the details of how it was achieving those high standards, you know it has done. And that's the key. So yes, there is a difference. It's not that the dissemination loses the quality, it just loses the detail of how that quality was achieved. There's a difference there that's quite important.
00:15:26 Sohail	Okay, great. Thank you. I kind of wanted to ask about—so I've been doing a lot of qualitative research, and as part of that process I'm expected to by institutions, by journals, by examiners to have quality assured my work. So to go through a checklist, sometimes a generic checklist, sometimes a checklist which is slightly more tailored to the method I'm using, and tick off all rates or give some sort of qualitative assessment of how the project's been done. Or to—if it's a review, a qualitative review, to do that on multiple other papers. But I know that some people very strongly believe that these have become a tick box exercise and that perhaps we're missing the wood for the trees and really just unnecessarily focusing in on this. So where do you stand on this? Do you think that we should do away with these checklists?
00:16:31 Michelle	I sit somewhere in the middle, I guess. I actually agree with certain scholars that checklists are a little bit too confining and problematic, especially for certain methodological processes like conversation analysis, for example, checklists don't serve us well all the time. Part of the problem with checklists is they get over relied on by

people who don't understand qualitative research. Or, for example, you get a paper sent to a set of reviewers and the journal requests that they use the COREQ checklist, which can be entirely inappropriate for certain kinds of research. And actually, there needs to be some flexibility in how those things are applied so that reviewers can say, "Actually, this paper doesn't need the COREQ checklist because COREQ is designed for interviews and focus groups, and this is not an interview or a focus group study. So in that sense, I always resist getting too locked into checklists. I think they're useful for undergraduate students, for example. People who are new to qualitative methods. I think they're also useful for funding bodies when they're not quite sure and they haven't got a qualitative expert on their panel to make decisions. I think they can be very helpful in teaching qualitative methods, but I think as expertise builds and as training builds and as we become better qualitative methodologists, we should be relying less on checklists and more on experience, creativity, innovation and knowledge around the method and the methodology.

00:17:58 Sohail   So what about—if not checklist then, what about certain principles that we try and achieve? So for instance, I've mentioned transparency. You know, there might be other principles that qualitative research should aim for. Is this something—some broad guiding principles that could be useful?

00:18:20 Michelle   Absolutely. I think guiding principles are a very good idea. And I think most qualitative researchers kind of know what they are broadly. And it comes back to what I said earlier. It's not so much about a rigid guiding principle, it's about how that principle gets implemented so that it's tailored to, not just the methodology and the method, but actually the positionality of the research and the project that's being done. So, you know, what does transparency mean in the current context of this project? And I think that's what often gets overlooked. We talk about these things as if they're static real things that you can conform to, but actually it's not as straightforward as that. Because it'll have a slightly different meaning and a different way of being implemented depending on what it is you're trying to achieve with a particular project. And also the team, because you get interdisciplinarity and teams from different backgrounds, different training, and they've got different ways of looking at a research problem. Now, personally, I think that's absolutely fabulous because what you get is some creative thinking. You get some really rich discussions, particularly when you've got data and you are starting to look at that and explore it together. But of course, that will have implications for quality and those guiding principles and how they get implemented into a particular project. And that's where it's much more difficult for reviewers and students to kind of capture how that gets implemented, because they're trying to stick with that rigid checklist that they think has to be checked off to make the project viable.

00:19:49 Sohail   Where is all this pressure coming from then?

00:19:52 Michelle   So the pressure is mostly external. And I guess it depends partly on the field you work in. And so I'm a health researcher and so the problem is we're competing with medics and, you know, huge funding pots of money that go to randomised control trials. That's what we're competing with. And you have to be able to stand on that stage with epidemiologists and virologists and biologists and say, "Actually, qualitative research is actually just as important and it does it in different ways and it's just as high quality as an RCT, but it's not outcomes focused in the same way." But the pressure definitely comes from universities. So anyone who works in a university is under pressure to publishing certain kinds of journals, they're under pressure to bring in certain amounts of funding, and they're under pressure to teach certain kinds of curriculums. And if you don't do those things, then you won't have a job in the future. So you do have to shape what you do to suit these huge institutional structural things that we have in society, and that's where the pressure comes from. So a little bit of flexibility and adjustment is probably required in thinking. Because unfortunately, it is now about impact pathways and applied research and what you can demonstrate in terms of outcomes. And that goes for qualitative research as well as quantitative research. So we have to make it work, otherwise there might not be a future for qualitative research.

00:21:22 Sohail	Yeah. So why did it end up like this? Why isn't it the case that qualitative research is the dominant mode of research and quantitative researchers are striving to meet our standards and be understood in our language?
00:21:38 Michelle	I think that's an almost impossible question to answer. I'm not really sure. I think historically qualitative research is newer than quantitative research. I guess positivism is an ingrained position to take. It's the way people generally view the world unless it's challenged. So I think there is a certain amount of ingrained thinking about measurement and numbers and statistics that kind of pre-exist outside of academia and outside of the research world anyway. And I think where we see the greater competitiveness arising has been mostly from the evidence-based movement, which did grow out of medicine. It was in medicine where there were concerns about medical research and what it meant, and the outcomes of medical research not being standardised practices and things like that. And so the evidence-based movement occurred that basically said that medicine needs to be based on the best evidence available so that, you know, medical practice is informed by high quality medical research. Now, interestingly, when that evidence-based movement began clinical judgment and patient experience, the kind of things we associate more qualitatively, were part of the definition of what evidence was. And, you know, that was really important. But gradually it seems to have moved away and become much more about outcomes and whether you can prove an outcome or disprove [chuckles] as the case may be, disprove a hypothesis. And gradually as evidence has kind of infiltrated other applied fields like education and social care and mental health and various other fields like human geography, et cetera, this push for evidence seems to have become much more synonymous with outcomes-focused research which is generally quantitative. And the qualitative community has responded to that, and we've seen a huge rise in popularity of qualitative research, particularly in fields like nursing and social work. But there is this kind of hidden battle about quality and value of the types of evidence that can be produced. And there is this kind of implicit hierarchy of evidence where qualitative research sits towards the lower end of the hierarchy.
00:23:53 Sohail	Yeah, that's really interesting. And I think some of these issues touch upon a series we're hoping to do next year around race colonialism and qualitative research. Because when you said qualitative research is relatively new, I was thinking from a colonial perspective. Actually, from a post-colonial sort of lens you can actually think of, "Well, we've been producing knowledge qualitatively for—since the beginning of time."
00:24:20 Michelle	Yes. [chuckles]
00:24:20 Sohail	But perhaps [chuckles] you know? But so there's real interesting fundamental underlying battles going on there, so thank you for giving an insight into that. That's really appreciated. I wanted to ask a question for, I guess, our student listeners. So, what tips do you have for someone new to qualitative research who is listening to what you're saying and perhaps they're doing a dissertation and they've got six months to do that? And they really want to do primary research and they've got good links and they're doing it but they're worried about quality. What can you say to them?
00:25:05 Michelle	So my first tip would be maintain the passion for it. Because nothing will drive you more than your personal passion and motivation to do it. And I've never lost mine. After all these years of doing qualitative research I'm still really passionate about fighting for its cause and enjoying the data collection process and the analytic process. So maintain the passion. I think the second thing I would say is read. So I always say to my undergraduate students, "You read your way to a degree. You read your way to a dissertation. You can't ever read enough stuff." So students seem to think that everything they read needs to make an appearance in the dissertation, and that is absolutely not true. Your references list will be a fraction of what you've read if you've done a good job. But actually reading and reading and reading will help you to conceptualise and understand some of those core issues within the paradigm of qualitative research, but also within the methodological approach that you have chosen. And all of that reading will then enable you to write a paragraph. So I always say, again, to my undergraduate students, "You might only write twelve lines, but you

may have had to read twelve papers to write those twelve lines. And you might only cite three of the papers ultimately in the paragraph but the other nine papers will have helped you understand the issue so that you can write your twelve lines." And that's, you know, you can never engage enough with the reading. And there are some really good sources out there in terms of websites. Even YouTube videos. You can watch YouTube videos. I know Braun and Clarke, for example, have done some YouTube stuff around thematic analysis, if that happens to be your approach. In terms of quality, the special issue does cover all the main methodological approaches. So, read whichever one of those papers happens to coincide with the approach that you've adopted and chosen, but also read some of the generic stuff. It's important to understand the alternative arguments. So in this podcast, I've very much promoted the heterogeneity argument. The idea that each methodology has got some unique aspects of quality and unique indicators that need to be accounted for. There are other scholars out there who might disagree with that and it's useful to get a sense of those wider arguments around quality. Particularly the arguments around universal markers and the adaptation of quantitative concepts, are really interesting to read as well. And by that you need to form your own opinion. You know, it's always good to be shaped by supervisors and other scholars in the field and by listening to this kind of podcast, but ultimately you need to decide, as a student, where do you sit in relation to qualitative research and quality? What's your view? Which of the arguments make the most sense to you and how are you going to utilise that and apply it in your own project?

00:27:40 Sohail   Thank you. I've got to say, the people I've spoken to in this series so far, such as yourself, are very gracious in suggesting that alternative opinions should always be read and people should come to their own decisions. And that's great advice and something that I think is—speaks to some of the kindness in qualitative research perhaps. So I'm curious about how you bring this to your teaching. So you've given advice to students, but is there any particular way that you teach qualitative research where you try and bring these lessons of quality out?

00:28:23 Michelle   Yes. I generally don't deliver a whole lecture on quality [chuckles] specifically, it's more embedded into each of the other methods' lectures that I do. Because I think, you know, especially for undergraduates who are starting to grapple, they've got so many different arguments that are relevant to qualitative research that they have to grapple with and understand. And quality is just one of those arguments. So I prefer to try and bring in little snippets of all the major issues into each of the lectures. So where I do a lecture on thematic analysis, for example, and we talk about the practicalities of doing coding and the different types of thematic analysis, I will bring in comments about quality. But also I prefer students to think for themselves. So whilst we give them tasters of key issues, we then get them debating in their small groups about things that matter. And so quite often they're asked to do some reading before they come to the lecture and the seminar, and then they're expected to engage in an activity or a task that really forces them to think about some of these issues around quality and how they might be resolved, and why they might matter in practice and how that might be problematic or beneficial. You know, and some of those wider political debates around funding and dissemination and, you know, those kinds of things as well. Trying to get them to think about a career post-degree. In case they want to go into PGR, what they might do. But as a qualitative project, what they might want to go on to learn beyond this method series that they're doing as part of their undergraduate course.

00:29:53 Sohail   Great. Thanks. Thanks for that insight. We're coming to the end of our time. So last question is always, do you have anything else to add around quality and where can people read your work?

00:30:06 Michelle   So, I guess I would just say that, you know, that I feel that the debate is only just starting. I think, you know, that the recognition of quality in the contemporary research field has changed compared to when these arguments first started in the early 2000s. So there was quite a bit of writing around quality and qualitative research in 2001, 2002, and then it kind of dropped off a bit and it's kind of been revived over the last few years. And I think it's got a long way to go. I think there's a lot more arguments to be had and I think it's through that creative thinking, through that dialogue, through

that disagreement, that actually we will start to make some progress on what we think of as quality in the different approaches. And so I say bring it on, respond, do your own work, create your own arguments, do your own reading and contribute to this quality debate. Because it's fascinating and it's important and it's only from a collective field approach that we will really start to embrace some of these different challenges with quality. And I've forgotten your other bit of the question. Sorry. [chuckles]

00:31:06 Sohail   I did a classic qualitative—

00:31:09 Michelle   Two-question…. [laughs]

00:31:09 Sohail   —faux pas. I never ask two questions at once. That was a test and a demonstration for our listeners.

00:31:18 Michelle   [laughs]

00:31:20 Sohail   The other question was, where can we find your work?

00:31:23 Michelle   So, I do have a website on the University of Leicester web pages, so most of my publications are listed on the website. So, yeah, just type my name into Google and you'll find stuff I've written around mental health and quality and qualitative research and various other things like ethics, et cetera. [chuckles]

00:31:44 Sohail   Brilliant. Thank you for coming on the podcast. Thank you so much for your time.

00:31:48 Michelle   Thank you for having me.

00:31:50 Sohail   Thanks, Michelle, for sharing her thoughts on what counts as quality and qualitative research. Hopefully we've gone a little bit of a way to solving that conundrum for you. Next episode is a real treat and I'm going to have to be on my best behaviour, because I will be talking to my boss Sharli Paphitis about how to use theory in qualitative research. [downtempo music fades in] It promises to be a great episode so please join us soon. Thank you so much and see you soon. [music fades out]

[End of recording]