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Qualitative Conundrums: Theory with Sharli Paphitis

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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 the 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 for 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 have with us Sharli Paphitis, research fellow at the Section of Women's Mental Health at KCL and associate researcher at the University of Rhodes.
- 00:01:13 Sharli Yeah. Hi. So, I'm Sharli, as you just said, and I have worked in many different disciplines in my years in academia. Initially at Rhodes University, where I used to be a senior lecturer in community engagement and philosophy, and now in the Section of Women's Mental Health at King's College London, where I work primarily on qualitative research focusing on mental health and recovery, developing interventions in low and middle income countries and in the United Kingdom.
- 00:01:53 Sohail Thanks for that. Today we'll be talking about theory in qualitative research, and this often means using a theoretical framework. Sharli, can you tell us a bit about that?
- 00:02:05 Sharli Yeah, because I think it's something that people are often afraid of when they come to qualitative research. It's like the scary bit of doing qualitative research. And also there's quite a lot of confusion around this idea of theoretical frameworks, which people sometimes use interchangeably with the idea of a conceptual framework. So, I mean, the question of what is a theoretical framework is a great question, but quite a tricky one to answer, and the answer is quite long. [chuckles] I teach in a qualitative research methods course in which I spend a whole lecture just talking about what a theoretical framework is. But let's try and unpack this in a kind of succinct way. So there's a couple of different ways that we can understand theoretical frameworks in qualitative research, and I think the one that is thought about most often by qualitative researchers is when they think about the methodology that they're going to use, right? In qualitative research. So when you think about the methodological approach you're going to take, whichever methodological approach you choose it's always grounded in a theoretical framework, right? Because built into your methodological approach is a whole lot of the assumptions and frameworks about the ontology and the epistemology that you on-board when you adopt that approach, right? And that's the way people often think about the theoretical framework in qualitative research. So when you think about your theory and your methodology coming together in qualitative research, you often think about, "Well, we might want to adopt a phenomenological approach, an IPA approach," or, you know, "We might want to do grounded theory." And lying behind that are a whole lot of ontological and epistemological assumptions that push us into theoretical frameworks. So if we think about grounded theory, the idea—the ontological ideas lying behind that are that people construct facts and phenomena. And the epistemological ideas behind that is that by creating meaning from experience we can interpret the world more clearly. And so a grounded theory approach is rooted in a constructionist way of thinking, but if we think about IPA, like a phenomenological approach, it's going to have a different ontology, right? And it's going to have a different epistemology. Specifically that people will identify and interpret multiple realities and people's interpretations of the world is what allows us to understand facts and phenomena that exists, right? And so we're working in a more interpretivist framework. And so very often when we talk about what

a theoretical framework is, we think about those kinds of theoretical frameworks. And I see a lot of students writing in their dissertations, for example, a very big theoretical framework section that explains the ontology and the epistemology of the approach lying behind their methodology that they've chosen to adopt. So it's almost a way of explaining why they've taken the approach to collecting and interpreting the qualitative data that they have in their thesis. Does that make sense?

00:05:50 Sohail Yeah, I think that makes sense. So basically, theoretical—is theoretical approach anything but epistemology and ontology?

00:06:00 Sharli In one sense, your theoretical framework is the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin and frame your methodology. They tell you how you can access knowledge and what knowledge is in the context of your study. And once you know that—once you have answers to those two questions, you can then start to collect and interpret qualitative data, right? Because qualitative data is [sighs] it's human facts about the world, but in order to collect and interpret human facts about the world we have to start from a point in which we agree on what human facts about the world are, and that is what your theoretical framework is setting up for you in your study. Does that make more sense?

00:07:00 Sohail Yeah, that does. I wondered, can you have multiple theoretical frameworks at the same time? What happens if you can't make up your mind? It's a pretty big question, about what is reality and how do we make knowledge?

00:07:15 Sharli Yeah, that's a great question. So I'm going to answer it, but then I want to circle back to what I was saying in the beginning. Because what I've explained about theoretical frameworks is only one side of the coin of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research. So it's a bit of a long answer, sorry. So to answer your question: what if you can't make up your mind? Well, you do need to make up your mind [chuckles] unfortunately, and this is where a lot of people, I think, come unstuck in qualitative research because it's hard. And we're asking some pretty big and difficult questions, as you said, about the nature of knowledge and what exists. Ontology. What is real? [chuckles] What exists out there, right? So these are big questions that people who have a background in philosophy are really comfortable answering, but also often don't have an answer to. And so it's challenging, but a couple of very practical things to think about in this. One is that, there's a whole range of different theoretical frameworks here undergirding different methodologies, and when you start to look into them you'll usually find one that either resonates with you, in particular as a researcher; your approach to research, the values and beliefs that you have already picked up from your context or your learning. So that will usually kind of push you in a direction. But the other thing is that you really need to have alignment across your qualitative study in what you're trying to understand. So what your research questions are, what the topic is, what your theoretical framework is in the other sense, which I'll talk about in a minute, and that will also help you to choose the right theoretical framework. Because you'll find that in particular areas, disciplines, or answering particular kinds of research questions, particular kinds of frameworks are typically used. And it's okay to challenge that if you have a really good reason for it, but you should probably try to understand why particular frameworks are being used in particular fields initially. Because often it—they're doing that because it makes sense. So one example that I think is really helpful here is to think about it in terms of, like, architecture and city planning. So if you think about a Swiss cottage, right? A Swiss cottage is designed to be in a Swiss climate, and if you go to Switzerland you'll see a whole lot of Swiss cottages for the reason that they make sense in that, like, geographical context. But it would be really weird to build a Swiss cottage in the middle of New York City, right? Because it wouldn't make much sense there amongst all the high rise buildings. It's not fit for purpose. That doesn't mean you couldn't build a Swiss cottage in the middle of New York if you had a really good reason, but you should try to look and understand why particular approaches and frameworks are being used in particular spaces.

- 00:10:51 Sohail I was thinking if it was some sort of Swiss cultural trust then maybe they would have a very good reason. Anyway. Are you going to tell me about the other side of theoretical frameworks?
- 00:11:03 Sharli Yeah, exactly. Okay. So I've spoken about the way in which I see this being used quite a lot and it's something that this part of theoretical frameworks rarely trips people up,. Because, as we said, it's answering these—it's asking these big questions and it's framing the whole study in a particular way. But if we think about the qualitative research process, much like any research process, really, we start off with a kind of review of the literature and we refine our research questions. But then in the process of doing that, we also start to look into a bunch of theories. Theories that are already out there that explain the way the world works, I suppose, or explain a particular phenomenon. So theories in this sense are theories that are already out there in the literature; theories that have already been tested and validated by other people, or theories that have become popular because they have predictive power or they have explanatory power, or they help us to see the world in a way that we kind of already felt like this was how things worked but we couldn't put it into words. And this theory unlocks that door for us to really make meaning of what we're experiencing and seeing. So those are the kinds of theories that are out there, and we need to use those theories to frame our qualitative research as well. So there's two senses in which we have a theoretical framework in qualitative research. And this part, I think, people struggle with often as well in qualitative research because they're afraid to read sociology or philosophy or anthropology, where these theories typically come from, because people often think that they're difficult or they take a long time to understand. And those things are true but there's lots of really good texts now that help people to gain access. A lot of people understand a lot about Marx, for example, and Marxist theories, and there's lots of ways we can access Marx without reading Marx at the very beginning. But we can find gateways in and get through to it. Or Foucault, who's often used in psychology work, for example, is very difficult to read if you're approaching it cold. But there's a lot of introductory text that you can use to understand it. So how is this used in qualitative research though? [chuckles] So typically, I guess, we're going to see it being used right at the beginning in part of your literature review. If you're taking a study from a very positivist perspective, the only thing you're going to include in your literature review are going to be other positivist studies. So, particular kinds of facts. But I guess in your literature review in a qualitative study, you would—if you're going to take a different approach to a positivist one, you're going to want to include theories [chuckles] that help us to explain and interpret the social world, if that makes any sense. And that should follow all the way through to help you choosing your methodological approach because it makes sense with that theory. So for example, if you're using, you know, feminist phenomenological theories, you're probably going to—that's going to align very closely with phenomenological approaches or with emancipatory approaches in which you're trying to create some kind of change in the world through your research rather than just uncover pre-given facts or understandings that are out there, right?
- 00:15:11 Sohail It's a bit intimidating sometimes to approach this whole body of theory when you've had a theorist write books and books on it. I used post-colonial theory in my PhD, and I ended up using just classical authors. Though it was useful, I did feel a little dumb. Was that okay? What's the balance between being a qualitative mental health researcher doing applied research and bringing in as much theory as possible?
- 00:15:41 Sharli Yeah, that's a great question. And I think it is about balance, as you say, and how do you find that balance? I suppose the important thing is the theory has to serve the research and so you need to spend time on theory. But only as much time as is useful to help you really make sense of your data, really interpret what is going on and answer your questions, right? That you set out to answer. So I don't know how you used theory in your study, but maybe we can talk about that and that might be useful to people. But one thing I try to help people that I work with, students, to understand is, when we collect qualitative data, when we talk to people, there's what they say and what they mean, but behind that is what they really mean. And then even further behind that is what they really, really mean. And it's really useful to use theories to help us to unpack

both what people really mean and then what people really, really mean when they speak to us. Because unless we have that kind of deeper theoretical understanding of the context of what's going on or how people really interact with each other, or bigger social context, broader things that are shaping the world and our lives, it's very difficult to uncover those fundamental truths that are coming through there. Does that make any sense?

00:17:37 Sohail Yeah, that makes lots of sense. But aren't you choosing a particular truth because you are talking about a particular theory? So I used post-colonial theory, but I didn't use feminist theory, and so I missed a very important truth around gender. So is that okay? How do I choose?

00:17:55 Sharli Yeah, good. I think that's right. And two things. One, like with any kind of study, you need to be able to see as many of your own blind spots as possible. And this is why explaining your theoretical framework and your approach in the study is so important, so that you can highlight what lens you're using to interpret and explain the world, and where you're coming from, and possibly what you're leaving out in the story. But it's also where that first sense of theoretical frameworks comes in that I spoke about. So when you explain that theoretical approach that you've taken in qualitative research, what you're helping us to understand is... the kind of knowledge that you're uncovering through theoretical—through qualitative research. And... yeah, how you're accessing it, if that makes sense. So your ontology and your epistemology is really important here to help explain the story of what truth it is that you're getting to and what that even means. I think we take a lot for granted when we come to applied health research. For example, when we think about it in—I'm not using positivist research in a derogatory way. I think positive research is very important, right? Positivist frameworks are very useful in particular settings, but in qualitative research, which can be done in a positivist way, we have a very, [sighs] I think, common sense view of what is real, what are truths and how we can get to know them. And the purpose of outlining your theoretical framework in that first sense that I spoke about is to help people understand in a very clear way the same things that you would take for granted in a positivist study. Does that make any sense at all?

00:20:07 Sohail I think you're continually making sense. Thank you so much. I wanted to ask a bit about the importance of doing this. You've kind of implied that whatever you do, you're going to be taking some sort of theoretical position. But in my field, migration and mental health, the vast majority of papers don't seem to talk about this. So how important is it really?

00:20:31 Sharli Yeah. I mean, you're going to get different answers to this from different people, so—and that goes for everything that I've said in this. But I think it's fairly important but it's also important not to, like, labour the point. And that's why you often don't see it coming through for many people. I think you need to give people enough information about your methodology and methods as is useful to help them understand what you've done in your study. Now, a lot of people don't do that very well, and the same goes for quantitative research. We get a lot of papers out there that have not explained their methods very well at all. And that's not helpful to anyone, actually. And methods are pretty important in the same way in qualitative research; methodology is pretty important to help us understand what you mean when you tell us what your results are or what your conclusions of your studies are, right? We need to know how you got there and what you mean by this. So, yeah, you don't see it often enough, I think. But also sometimes you see too much. I think—especially for doctoral students who go to a lot of qualitative research training, I think they can sometimes labour the sections on their theoretical framework and spell out perhaps a little bit too much. But, yeah, you're going to get different answers to that question.

00:22:11 Sohail I think I was probably one of those students. I wanted to know what's stopping me from making up my own theory and then applying it. Why can't I just do that?

00:22:21 Sharli It's a great... aspiration, I would say, to make up your own theory. So let's unpack that a little bit. I think it's quite problematic to think of theory as something that's made up.

So theories are [chuckles] are formed, I mean, over quite long periods of time usually, and they rely on quite complex and rigorous thinking; and different ways theories are formed as well. Of course, there's a lot of different types of theory though. So we can think about very formal theories, which I've just been alluding to there, which are made up of, you know, layers of concepts and constructs and propositions which all come together to shape this bigger theory. But there's also less formal theories, so informal theories, that we can use in qualitative research. So, you know, if you think about informal theories that are drawn from lived experience, for example. You know, we might think about the kind of theories that mental health nurses have about relapse in their patients, for example, or we might think about policemen's theories about particular kinds of policing... protocols. I don't know; something like that. So there's those kinds of theories drawn from lived experience that might be useful in your study, or might be the only kind of theory that you want to look at in your study because that's what's going to help you interpret your data most effectively. Could you make up one of those informal theories? I think 'make up' is a problematic way to think of that. I think you would need to really look into and uncover those kinds of informal theories rather than just making them up. But lastly—sorry, all my answers seem to be super, super long, but it's such a complex topic. So lastly, there is generated theory, which is often used in qualitative research, and grounded theory approaches is a very common way of trying to generate theory through qualitative research, right? And the theory is built up through the process of qualitative research. Now, would I encourage you to do it? I think—just personally, I think that this is a very difficult thing to do. I think it requires a really skilled person to generate theory through qualitative research because of all the things I've just said about theories. I mean, think back on what I said about theories and how they have predictive power. They have explanatory power. They help us to understand the world. And generating that is difficult and I think requires quite a lot of training.

00:25:39 Sohail Sharli, could you please give us an example of how you practically use theories to interpret data?

00:25:45 Sharli Yeah, sure. So I mean, there's a lot of different ways that you can use theory in qualitative research to interpret your data. And I think it's quite important to think about what it is you're trying to achieve and the questions you're trying to answer and the type of data you've collected. All of those things are really important to think about before you start getting into the nitty-gritty of how to use theory in, you know, interpreting and analysing your data. And if you're new to using theory in qualitative research in this way, I guess one way to start would be to look at either the concepts or the propositions in the theory that you're using and to build a framework for analysing your data and use that framework. And when you interpret your data against that framework that you've built, it will help you to analyse the data in the way that is supported by your theory and in which the theory helps to make sense of the real meaning of your data. You may also find that elements of your data help you to expand on the theory that you're using or refine or even challenge aspects of that theory for the particular population you're working with or the context that you're working in, or in response to a specific situation. And I guess that's the way that I usually encourage post-grad students that I'm working with, who are working on their first qualitative project, to work. I get them to build a coding or interpretive framework from a theory, and that really helps to come to a very concrete understanding of the various aspects of theory, I guess. But also it gives you a really concrete way to use that theory as a lens for interpreting and analysing your data. So you can even—I've had post-grad students make a matrix framework of either the concepts or the propositions of the theories they're wanting to use, and to set that up in almost a framework analysis kind of way to start interpreting their data. So I guess that's an important way that you could practically use theory in qualitative research as a starting point.

00:27:59 Sohail Is there a theory that you have used and can you talk us through how you used it?

00:28:05 Sharli Yeah. So I guess theoretical work that I've engaged with quite a lot over the last few years is Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic injustice. It's become quite popular in disciplines outside of philosophy, even though Miranda Fricker is a philosopher. So

epistemic injustice is a great theory. I love it so much. What is it about? Maybe as a starting point and then I'll explain how I used it. So, an epistemic injustice is something that's a kind of harm in which individuals or groups are wronged in their capacity as knowers or bearers of knowledge, right? So that makes it an epistemic injustice. And epistemic injustices really dehumanise groups and individuals by de-legitimising them as knowers. And it's committed both when people are barred from having their testimony into that marketplace of ideas, into the realm in which we accept and believe what people are saying. And this happens particularly when marginalised or oppressed individuals or groups struggle to interpret the world and their place in it without having to do so through lenses that are constructed by dominant or powerful groups, perspectives and meanings, right? And so epistemic injustices lead to a number of harms, right? But it—this theory also explains quite a lot about underlying dynamics in various social situations. So I've used the concepts and propositions from this theory in a number of projects. For example, to understand the dynamics at play in participatory research between researchers and community participants, thinking about whose knowledge counts and why people act in particular ways within that participatory framework as you move through the different stages of a project. In another project I used this theoretical lens to analyse the land restitution policies in South Africa, and then to go on to interpret life narrative interviews that I collected with participants who were land claimants working within those regulatory frameworks that were set up by those policies. And so here, this lens of epistemic justice or injustice allowed me to look at aspects of participants' life narratives and highlight things that showed how members of these claimant communities face injustices. What it was directly from their lives that manifested as epistemic injustices. Things that they were saying or experiencing, but also exactly why there are failures in communication between land management authorities and the claimant communities because of epistemic components, right? Because of this kind of epistemic misunderstanding or what's called a credibility deficit. And so I guess the explanation here is that theory is useful when you're unpicking something like a life narrative to really make sense of the events in a way that goes behind simply what's said, simply what's happened, and to understand how that's impacting on the social dynamics or how policies play out.

00:31:37 Sohail Brilliant, thank you. That's a really cool concept and something that I should also look at using in my work, so that's really appreciated.

00:31:45 Sharli Yeah. Every time I talk about epistemic injustice people say, "That's the theory I never knew I needed, but now I'm going to use." So, it's a good one. [chuckles]

00:31:55 Sohail I wanted to end by asking if there's a resource to look at theories and theoretical frameworks? How do you know where to start?

00:32:02 Sharli It's a minefield out there, isn't it? I suppose. And... where would I suggest starting? Okay. So I would say probably the best places to start are Braun and Clarke. So, that's a really good place to start. But then I also think Helen Kara has a whole load of really, really practical and useful books in understanding theory in qualitative research. I mean, the books aren't about that, they're just about qualitative research in general. But her sections on using theory in qualitative research are really helpful, especially around understanding how—you know, what the underlying theories behind different methodologies and methodological approaches are. I think her—she's got some really good tables for you to look at. Braun and Clarke also have some good tables on that. So that's where I would start and then branch out from there. Like, once you've got a handle, I think, on the basics, which is fairly quick to do, you might start to think to yourself, "Okay, but how do I really do this in practice?" And in particular, I think one of the most difficult things to think through in qualitative research is really using theory well in interpreting and writing up your data. That's probably the most difficult part. So a book that I always turn to is a book by Jackson and Mazzei which is called *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data across Multiple Perspectives*. This is—I don't know if you can see this book. It's a great book. Yeah. This book is really useful and it just runs you through with one data set that they—one qualitative data set that they collected, how they would work with, for example, Derrida in using—thinking through deconstruction, and Spivak and post-colonial marginality; Foucault, power and

knowledge; Butler, performativity; Deleuze, desire. So it's just really useful to see how you could take different theories and use them with the same data set to interpret it in multiple ways, asking different questions of that data.

00:34:29 Sohail

Thank you. That's incredibly useful. That's it for today. Thank you so much Sharli for entertaining us on our qualitative quagmires. [downtempo electronic music fades in] I hope you can join us for the next session where we'll be talking to Harriet Boulding, research fellow at the Policy Institute at King's, about impact. What is it? How do we achieve it? Is it even real? Join us then. [music fades out]

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