Qualitative Open Mic: What Counts as Qualitative Research? Episode 4

Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
- Kitty Saunders (Speaker) (Kitty)

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

00:00:10 Sohail   Hi. I'm Sohail Jannesari, a migrant rights researcher and activist. At the Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre, mercifully shortened 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 between their work and qualitative research. In doing so, we hope to broaden and challenge understandings of what qualitative research is and can be. Today's guest is Kitty Saunders or Katherine Saunders, and she is a consumer podcaster and has a podcast called *Mend the Gap* and—

00:01:02 Kitty   *Mending the Gap.*

00:01:02 Sohail   —*Mending the Gap*. No, but Kitty, would you like to introduce yourself?

00:01:08 Kitty   Sure. So, hi, Sohail. Thanks so much for having me on this podcast today. It's such an exciting topic and such an exciting thing to be asked to do. My name is Dr Kitty Saunders. I did my PhD in IoPPN. I just finished very recently and I have just started a role as a research associate with the Mental Health Policy Research Unit. But during my PhD, I applied for and was awarded funding for a podcast on women's mental health. So I took charge of the whole process and put out about sort of eight to ten episodes of a podcast called *Mending the Gap*.

00:01:53 Sohail   Thank you, Kitty. So we were talking earlier about how the process of planning for and creating a podcast might actually have a lot of similarities with the process of doing qualitative research. So could you tell me a bit more about how you plan your podcasts? How you chose what to do and the areas and the questions and all these things?

00:02:18 Kitty   Yeah. So there are lots of similarities between podcasting and research in general, really. So the pre-production process for a podcast is actually really similar to how you would formulate a research question. So the process is really important to make sure that you're creating something that's new or has a kind of unique slant, something that's relevant and something that people either want or need to know about. And that's very similar to what you would do at the start of a research project. You would be identifying kind of a gap in the literature, and the more kind of business talk way that you might describe it for a podcast is kind of, you know, fill the gap in the market, but really it's the same as identifying that literature gap. And that's kind of the most important thing because that sets you up, really, for every other decision that you're going to make down the line when you're creating the podcast. So the gap that I identified when I was thinking about my podcast was, you know, obviously I'm a young woman who is in academia researching women's mental health, and I would talk to my friends about it and they would say, "Oh my gosh! This is so interesting. How do I not know anything about any of this really interesting stuff?" And I just thought—you know, something that my friends do is listen to podcasts and I was thinking it's a really good way of explaining things in kind of bite-sized chunks and get things out to a wider audience. Academia can be quite insular and quite—and exclude lots of people, including the groups that they're probably actually trying to help. So a podcast seemed like a really great way of bridging that gap. So that was how I identified a need, and then I went ahead and started recruiting participants for my interviews.

00:04:21 Sohail   Great, thanks. And in identifying that need, I mean, could you tell me a bit more about that? So, was it a particular aspect of women's mental health that your friends found interesting or was there one area where you constantly came across, perhaps, a particular interest or lack of knowledge?

00:04:43 Kitty   Well, I think the thing about women's mental health in particular is that it's something that we, among women, I think have a lot of discussion around things that affect us and

things that come up for us. You know, we think about kind of reproductive health, you think about decisions around contraception, you think about pregnancy, think about relationships, violence and abuse within relationships. All of these really kind of big and complicated things that affect us day to day that we all know about. But actually it was quite obvious to me that there is quite a lot of work being done to understand these things and to put preventative measures out there to improve the nice guidelines, you know, to do all of these things, but my friends who were experiencing all these things didn't know about any of that stuff. So there was this huge disconnect between what is being done to kind of problem solve and understand things better and what the kind of people on the ground who were experiencing those things knew or were aware of. And I just felt like that was a real shame. There was so much good work being done and they didn't know it.

00:05:53 Sohail	Interesting. Thank you. So how do you go about recruiting people to talk to, to try and fill this gap? Do you go for the most prominent academic? Who do you talk to?
00:06:08 Kitty	So I think probably finding podcast guests is somewhat similar to identifying people to interview in qual research. Because your inclusion criteria could really be anything and it depends a lot on what you decided in what I've called pre-production for podcasts, but is in the kind of design planning stages of a research project. And you might be looking, for instance, for lots of people who have the same job, like PhD students, and then in each of your episodes you might look to kind of identify differences between their experiences, or similarities between their experiences across the episodes. Or you might want to find people with all different types of jobs and explore a range of experiences and backgrounds in your podcast. And really, like, there isn't really a right answer to the way that you do that, but it depends a lot on what you've planned for beforehand. And the recruitment process is also similar in some ways in that people have to consent to be interviewed. And not just to be interviewed, but to be recorded, and then be comfortable with that conversation becoming part of the public domain. It's going to be very clear in most podcasts who is speaking and people need to be comfortable putting themselves out there. So, lots of things to consider. The way I approached it was, I was looking for researchers, specifically researchers who were conducting work on women's mental health currently. And I was really lucky in that I had access to a really great pool of people already because of where I worked. So identifying people that way. I then also kind of did a bit of opportunistic type sampling when I was invited to a couple of really exciting events. I was invited to an art gallery opening, and the art was created by an artist and a researcher together and their opening had loads of really interesting people. The exhibition was about human trafficking, which obviously is something that affects both men and women but has a hugely gendered slant to it when you consider kind of sex trafficking. So I ended up having a barrister on the podcast, having the head of a really well-known human trafficking charity on the podcast. Just really using those opportunities to find people who had experiences or knowledge around something that I was interested in and just putting those feelers out.
00:08:40 Sohail	It's really interesting. When you were talking about this art exhibition around human trafficking, and I know that the artist worked with survivors of human trafficking to create these pieces of art, I wondered whether—and you were saying that actually to be on a podcast you need to be able to put yourself out there. I was wondering whether, is there such a thing as an anonymous podcast? Is there such a thing as—is there a way of doing it which actually enables people to retain some anonymity and confidentiality but still be able to speak? Because I was thinking a lot of the people who put themselves—who are comfortable putting themselves out there are a certain type of people and maybe then your podcast wouldn't have a big range of people.
00:09:31 Kitty	Completely. And I mean, there are, you know, very, very good reasons why people, particularly survivors of human trafficking as an example, would not want their voice or their story or their name to be detailed on a podcast. But even actually, not even at that level, but I came across lots of people who just did not like the idea of being on a podcast at all for their own kind of personal reasons of, "I feel uncomfortable." Or, you know, just things that are perfectly reasonable reasons for not wanting to be on a

podcast. But in the answer to your question of whether or not it's possible to be on a podcast and be anonymized, yes, it is of course possible. It depends a lot on—whether or not that's appropriate for the podcast depends a lot on what you're doing and what the podcast is aiming to do. There's a podcast called *The Tip Off* which is about—it's all about investigative journalism and often kind of exposing stories where there are people who probably wouldn't want their information and their voice to be available to the general public. And so, you know, they take out identifying details. They use pseudonyms, they use voice distorters sometimes to actually change what somebody sounds like on a podcast. And that allows enough of people's stories to come through. That their voice is included but not compromise their safety or their privacy or, you know, any kind of confidential information around sometimes these quite sensitive areas. So it's possible, but it just depends. It depends a lot on what you're trying to achieve.

00:11:20 Sohail   Great, thank you. So now it'd be good to talk a bit your interviewing process. And so how did you prepare? Did you have a standard script? Did you tailor it? How did you keep the threads and this comparison you talked about earlier? Yeah, very curious.

00:11:43 Kitty   Yeah. So I put in a lot of prep work into the interviews before they even happened. Which isn't a necessary part of podcasting and there are a million podcasts where they just turn the microphones on and on they go and that's fine. But I think because the work that we were talking about was at times quite sensitive and quite difficult topics, but also because it's quite technical, I wanted to make sure that I had a good understanding of what was going on, of what the literature shows, what the paper that we were going to be talking about showed. I wanted to be a kind of informed interviewer. I didn't want to be the kind of naive host, which is fine for some podcasts, but I wanted to have a little bit of a background. So I did lots of reading beforehand to make sure that I understood everything I needed to. I wrote topic guides. I suppose the word is topic guides for qualitative work, but I wrote questions for each guest tailored to each guest. And sometimes there were similarities. I feel like particularly at the beginning and the end you had kind of opening questions, and then at the end you had closing questions. You know, "Where do we go from here? What's next? What's next for you?" And those were similar across podcasts, but the kind of meaty questions in the middle were all different. And I really tried to make my guests as comfortable as possible. So I shared questions beforehand with all of my guests so that they could see what I was going to be asking them. And again, that sort of depends on what type of interview you're doing. If you're doing a very kind of investigative type approach, a quite challenging or quite critical interview, then you wouldn't be sharing your questions beforehand. You'd want to be catching a guest off guard and getting them to think on the spot. But I wasn't aiming to do that at all so I shared the questions beforehand. And then I even collaborated on the questions with the guests. So if somebody felt that one part of their research project that they wanted to talk about was really important and actually should be the focus of the interview, then I adapted the questions based on that feedback, sent them back and really had a kind of collaborative process. And I think really the foundation that underlies that is that people want to put their best foot forward. People want to make sure that they come across in the best way possible, that they come across knowledgeable, that they come across on the ball and able to speak well and freely about their topic. And you want to make sure that people—you take measures to make sure that people feel really comfortable. And also to account for the fact people get really nervous. People—I had lots of people, particularly even friends who I knew very well get really nervous before recording. And so kind of preparing people for what you're going to be talking about beforehand can alleviate a little bit of that nervousness.

00:14:55 Sohail   Yeah. I've actually found that too. And actually I feel like people are more nervous for some reason for a podcast than for an interview, even if it's perhaps around a sensitive matter. There's something maybe about the public nature of a podcast, I wonder, which....

00:15:12 Kitty   Definitely. Yeah. No, I definitely agree. I think there's something about, you know, you being named, it being your voice, it being out there for the whole world to listen to, for

your family to listen to, for your ex-boyfriend to listen to. You know, anybody could listen to you talking. And I think also there's something quite personal about your voice. You know, it's one thing to read something that you might have written on a keyboard in a Word document, but the way that you speak and your intonation, and especially if you're quite nervous, the speed that you speak at, the things that you say, the way that you laugh, it's all really personal information. And that's why, you know, in qualitative work we're so careful with our recordings, right? We make sure that they're stored safely, that they're destroyed appropriately, because actually your voice in itself is a piece of personal information. And I think that without thinking about it in that much detail, people kind of know that. People have an appreciation that actually your voice is a really personal part of you.

00:16:15 Sohail   Yeah, for sure. I wanted to ask a bit about during the interview. So you've prepped a lot and the other person also knows what's coming. Do you find that that maybe stifles a conversation sometimes or does it make them comfortable and so you can take it to other places which they might not have otherwise wanted to go?

00:16:40 Kitty   Yeah. I think the prep isn't to make it so that you have a very strict play by play of what's going to happen. I think it's to prepare people for, "These are the things that we're going to talk about and here are the directions I'm going to take it in. If you want me to change that, let me know." And then they do that. And then that safety and that comfort that you have leaves a bit of space for discussions around topics that might come up spontaneously. So someone might say off the cuff, "Oh, you know, in a previous job actually I did something like this and then we did it differently this time." And it gives you space to just say, "Oh, that's really interesting. Tell me about what you did before." If people are already uncomfortable and they've got no clue what's coming, you can kind of use—no. If people are not—if they're not comfortable already, then you can't do that. You can't just take people off in a million different directions and disrupt them even more. But if you've—yeah, if you've kind of laid that foundation of a good working relationship for that podcast, then yeah, I think it's nice to kind of appreciate the spontaneity and make something of it when it comes up.

00:17:52 Sohail   Cool. So once you've got the interview done and you've got it recorded, what's your process? I know that you might talk for a lot longer than you would want to publish so is there an editing process? Do you send the recording to the person to review or what's the sort of steps involved?

00:18:16 Kitty   Yeah. So I was thinking about this before we started speaking, and I was thinking about the edit. And really the edit in itself is a form of analysis and, you know, there are many ways to edit a podcast. It's not as simple as just—well, it doesn't have to be as simple as just editing the levels, taking out the ums and leaving it there. You know, you might decide to leave the conversation to flow throughout the episode. You might just leave mistakes in as long as they don't derail the conversation completely. Whereas other people might really heavily edit and they might add voiceovers to remove the original question, so they might remove themselves and then rerecord a voiceover. And there's no really right or wrong way of doing it, but the results do become very different at the end. So it's good to kind of know the direction that you want to take it in and you want to have an idea of how you want it to sound at the end before you get going on the edit. And it's similar with analysis, right? It's similar with qual analysis. If you do a lot to it, you will get something very different at the end. Whereas if you do kind of a different type of analysis, you'll get something else. And, you know, yeah, you're right. You definitely—I mean, one of the best tips I ever got was don't record more than you want to edit [chuckles] which I think was a great piece of advice. But inevitably, sometimes you get carried away and things kind of slip into conversation and you take it in different directions and then suddenly you've recorded fifteen minutes more than you meant to. But there might be sections that are really central to what you're interested in. So you might have agreed at the beginning that you really wanted to focus on a particular part of that study, and at the end, even though you've recorded lots more, you still think that's the case. And then, so there might be other sections that are a bit more tangential and you can decide whether or not those are important or relevant enough to keep. And then if they are, you have to work out how you want

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to weave that story together. And it doesn't always have to come in the same order. There can be some chopping and changing to create a story or a narrative of what you want to tell throughout your podcast episode. And you're telling a story that you want and you need to be cohesive, but how you put that together is kind of up to you.

00:20:44 Sohail   I was very taken by when you said you might want to leave in mistakes. I guess intuitively I think that's something I would like to do, but then also it's something that I would always try and avoid or try and—you know, I guess we want to erase our mistakes. But I wanted to ask, why would you leave in your mistakes and why would you not? Is there—what's behind this decision?

00:21:13 Kitty   Well, I think it's about keeping it human, really, and keeping it something that is listenable to another human being. There's a balance. Obviously you don't want to have a podcast that's full of someone going, "Oh, well is that the way? Oh, actually fifty—was it fifty percent or was it sixty percent? Oh, I'm actually not sure." Because to a listener that is just horrible. That is really difficult to keep listening to essentially and you're going to get people dropping out. So you don't want it to be like that. But equally, mistakes can bring humour, mistakes can bring a little bit of, sort of, something that's different. And it's not like you're listening to a robot going, "Fifty percent of people had depression, then of those people, da, da, da." Like that is dry and ultimately you might want it to be a more conversational tone. You might want your listeners to relate to what you're talking about. It depends an awful lot on what you're aiming for but I would think that if you were going to leave in mistakes it's because you would want people to feel like they were listening to a real conversation and not to two robots just going, "That's very interesting. What do you think about this?" Yeah.

00:22:33 Sohail   So you kind of modify or modulate your conversation with your audience in mind? So you have a very clear idea of who you're speaking to?

00:22:48 Kitty   Yeah. So your target audience is probably one of the most important things to consider when podcasting, and I think the trap that people fall into is making a podcast that they want to listen to without considering whether or not you are the target audience. And my target audience did change a little bit. It started with being me wanting to kind of make research more publicly available to the public, but then—as in to sort of general lay audiences. But it ended up being far more research focused and far more appropriate for kind of early career researchers, students, people who were, you know, at university doing undergrad or post grad courses, to give people a bit of an insight into a more academic world. Which I think was good for a lot of reasons, because I think it's really useful to that population. It's not just for interest's sake, but I think it's actually of use to hear about different methodologies and hear about, you know, different—yeah, different methodologies. That's probably the best way of putting it. But I did have feedback from a lot of my friends who were listening to it who said that they loved it. So it kind of ended up working for both but I think if it—yeah, it did change. It did change.

00:24:18 Sohail   Thanks, Kitty. And what happened—once you've edited, you've got everything sorted, how do you go about promoting it? Did you go back to the people you interviewed and did they help with the promotion or did they—were they interested or had they forgotten it?

00:24:40 Kitty   No. The people who were on the podcast were really excited to be on the podcast, and when it came out they shared it with all of their networks which obviously really helped. But it also did something which was really cool because we had a kind of international—had international guests on the podcast. And it meant that I got listenership all over the world, which was just something that I hadn't really considered would happen but it was really amazing. My host platform was SoundCloud and it showed me all the different countries that my podcast was being listened in, and that was just a really kind of fulfilling thing to see and wouldn't have happened had my guests not shared it with their, you know, family and friends in their home countries, but also their networks in the countries that they worked in. And so, yeah, that was really something that I couldn't have done by myself for sure.

00:25:43 Sohail	Okay. Great. Well, maybe this podcast will reach Iran one day and….
00:25:50 Kitty	You have to do some sharing. [chuckles]
00:25:52 Sohail	[laughs] Great. Thank you, Kitty, I think that was most of my questions. Did you have anything you wanted to add about the parallels between qualitative research and podcasting or differences?
00:26:11 Kitty	I think there are—you know, there are kind of obvious differences in a way, but the similarities are quite striking, and I hadn't really thought about it until now. Until you asked if I would take part in this recording. Because so much of it is about understanding people and making people comfortable and telling a story with other people's words. That's sort of what—the type of podcast I did and a lot of other people do. That's what it's all about. It's about sharing and raising up the voices of other people, and the way that you do that best is by making sure that people are prepared and comfortable and happy. And that—I think that is kind of—that's quite central. My understanding of qual is that that's quite central to qualitative work and actually they're quite similar in that regard.
00:27:08 Sohail	Thank you so much. So, where do we go to listen to your podcast? Do you have any plans to get back to it?
00:27:17 Kitty	I would love to go back to podcasting. It really was one of the most fulfilling things that I did throughout my PhD. And part of that was because I did it all myself so I really learned a lot. Never considered myself becoming a bit of a sound technician ever, but managed to gain those skills. If you want to listen to *Mending the Gap*, you can listen on SoundCloud, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. You can follow the podcast on our Twitter account @MendTheGapPod. And, yeah, I'm kind of toying with the idea of new podcasts, so if there's anybody out there listening who is also interested and wants to kind of brainstorm with me and maybe join me on another podcast journey, then let me know. To be confirmed.
00:28:11 Sohail	Very exciting. [upbeat rhythmic music fades in] Well, I look forward to that. Thank you so much Kitty for your time. Thank you so much for your insights. [music fades out]

[End of recording]