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Qualitative Open Mic: What Counts as Qualitative Research? Episode 2

Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
- Nathaniel Martin (Speaker) (Nathaniel)

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[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 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 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, our guest is Nathaniel Martin, a community researcher at King's College London. Nathaniel, would you like to introduce yourself?

00:00:57 Nathaniel Yeah. Brilliant. Thank you, Sohail. As Sohail kindly said, my name is Nathaniel Martin. My role at King's College London is a community research coordinator. And this is a partnership role between King's College London and specifically the Centre for Society and Mental Health and Black Thrive, an organisation which was originally based in Lambeth but has now gone global. And if I could sum up and summarise what Black Thrive does, they are all about systems change. Specifically for the lives of Black people concerning their mental health.

00:01:30 Sohail Great. Thanks, Nathaniel. So yeah. We were talking a bit earlier about your journey into research. So do you want to say a bit about—a bit about that? And sort of how you started to think about applying qualitative research? And how you got into where you are now?

00:01:49 Nathaniel Brilliant. Sure thing. So [chuckles] the one thing I would say—and I'm learning to adjust to not saying—is that I am not by nature a researcher. My background is in youth work and sports development. Before I was in this role, I was leading a youth project in Brixton and Clapham for two and a half years. And before that I was a BMX cycling coach. So a lot of my skills and methods used come from my engagement with young people directly. Yeah, through youth work and sports development. And trying to engage the community in activities that they wouldn't usually do. So I really have a big passion for that just because of my own background. I was a BMX racer from the age of ten until probably twenty or so. And I still coach BMX racing now. I was also—I also really benefitted from great youth work in my younger years. And a really big part of my purpose in life is giving back to the community that—that I grew up in. So everything that I've done, and everything I hope to continue to do, up to the day I die, is hopefully trying to serve the people. And if I could be as specific as possible, the people of Lambeth. Even more specific, the people of Brixton. Because that's where I am from. So yeah. My journey into research—or this specific role—came through just me [chuckles] looking for a different career path. I love the youth sector, but it's severely underfunded. And funnily enough, the parent of a rider that I coach sent me this job role. And then when I looked at the job description, I was like, "Oh my goodness. This fits me like a glove." And—because it's based on—in an area that I care about, i.e. Lambeth. Supporting young Black people. I love to do that. I'm a Black man myself. And looking into the mental health of young Black people. I think that's so key and important in this day and age. And that's been heightened and brought more into focus through the pandemic. So when I think about my previous roles, I was doing research. So I was gathering the opinions and thoughts of young people concerning what they wanted to do through youth projects that I was working on. I was gathering thoughts and opinions of local people in my BMX role. We were creating new facilities and trying to build new clubs. So we'd always have consultations with local communities. So I'm always—I think, yeah. Research in that sense—in the qualitative sense—was, yeah, hearing where people are at. Hearing what—where—what people want to do. What—if they think an idea is good or bad. And just also hearing what contributions they would have towards a particular focus. In the youth work role, yeah, I was always trying to figure out what the kids wanted to do. And as much as we may have loads of different things to do, one thing that came out of that research is that

that questioning was understanding that young people just want a safe space to be. They want a place that they can make their own. They want a place that they can just hang out with their friends. Which sort of always confused me. Because I'd set up this youth club with all different kinds of activities. And then a group of them will just want to sit on the phones together. In the quietest space in the whole place. Which was quite funny. So yeah. Just trying to understand where—what people want. Why they want it. When they want it. All the questions that relate to such investigation.

00:05:52 Sohail Great. Thanks, Nathaniel. So now you're in your role at King's College London, do you think that your purpose has changed, from the sort of gathering of opinions that you used to do? Do you feel like you're still able to take knowledge and apply it to the needs of the community you want to serve?

00:06:18 Nathaniel I don't think my purpose has changed, no. I just believe that the process and how I gather knowledge has changed. So my current work—one of my current focuses at work is the Stop and Search Project. I hope to be launching mid to late July. And that depends on my ethics application being successful. So—and this project is something that we're engaging in with people to co-design and specific training for the police and their engagement of young Black people in Lambeth. But there's also going to be an ideas workshop where young people can think of their own ideas. And that doesn't necessarily restrain them to the training of police, but other ideas and suggestions that they may have regarding the police's relationship with Black communities in Lambeth. So the process has changed because—and now I have to think about things like an ethics application. Which my youth work role was doing sort of similar practice. But it was never that—decided by a community of people per se, as to what I do and don't do. Sure, I had my land manager there, who would then talk to his line manager, who was the CEO of the whole company—of the whole charity. But yeah. Having to do it in this format. Having to go through pages and pages and pages of questions. Which is really helpful. But it's just a bit of a shock to the system, coming from roles where a lot of things happened over conversation. We would definitely get it down on paper and have it—and then here and there. But to have, like, specific deadlines which are so constrained—because my understanding of the ethics committee at Kings is that there's very many people that are working on it. And they only meet once a month to review applications. Whereas in my youth work role, I know I could just pick up the phone or send an e-mail and get a response quite quickly. So I'm still learning. I'm still learning. But in terms of gathering data, I still want to be engaging young people and hearing their voice. Particularly around issues that—that affect them the most. Such as stop and search. We know that fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds are the age group that are most likely to be stopped and searched in London. Across all boroughs. So yeah, we will definitely get their thoughts and opinions. Get their suggestions. Get their ideas on paper and hopefully make them a reality.

00:09:04 Sohail Great. Thank you. And how are you gathering this? How are you gathering their thoughts and opinions?

00:09:10 Nathaniel Yeah, so the plan is to run some one-to-one interviews with a couple of young people. And they'll be able to share their experiences around stop and search. But I'll also be questioning them about how they feel about stop and search. And—and particularly, there's a really interesting question about how they felt at the time when they were stopped and searched. And how they felt and how they feel about themselves, how they feel about the police, how they feel about stop and search now. To see if there's any development or changes in their thought process. There's also going to be a focus group gathering young people across Lambeth who live there or who work there. To, again, share some experiences in a safe space. But also begin to think of ideas and solutions that will change the issue that they're facing. And then lead into the ideas workshop and designing community police training. Which are very similar, but also quite different. So designing police community training, that is—there's already funding for that specifically from the Mayor's office. Which we have to actually—so the product itself will look like training for the police. Whereas the ideas workshop is a lot more open. And young people can bring whatever suggestions and ideas to that space. We'll be working with people from the Centre for Society and Mental Health. People from

Black Thrive. Potentially some pro bono lawyers, who have done some successful work with police and community engagement in America. And they've offered their services to us here as well. So we're going to have loads of different stakeholders involved, and make this a collective effort. Rather than just me saying what I want to do and putting it into action.

00:11:11 Sohail Do you think that it might have been easier to have these conversations about stop and search in the youth group contexts, as opposed to the research context?

00:11:28 Nathaniel That's a very good question. I believe that through this research context, it allows me to think a lot more about what these conversations will bring up, and then try and action how to support the young people in this way. So it's been suggested that, yeah, we might be bringing up some very traumatic experiences of young people. So what does aftercare look like? And the plan is to develop a partnership with Mental Health—the Mental Health Foundation. And specifically a program that they're working called Becoming a Man, aka BAM. B-A-M. BAM currently runs circles in different schools in Lambeth, engaging young men and helping them to identify what it means to become a man. And in that, there are trained counsellors that are working with these young people to help them understand how to express themselves. And help them to understand themselves in general. So that the hope is to get these BAM counsellors alongside the young people through the design process of all of their ideas. But also once the project is officially finished, allowing the young people to have access to these counsellors, should they wish to disclose things or work through any experiences that they may have found very difficult. Whereas in the youth work sector, I think—I'm not sure if I'd have as direct access to counsellors and trained people to deal with issues that may come up. Yeah, so I think youth work may have allowed the conversation to be opened up more—a bit more freely. However, I feel like research does put a necessary question to what does the outcome of that look like? Whereas I might not have thought about the outcomes specifically, and maybe had the access to—to the resources that the young people need in my youth work role. I don't think I would have had as much as I do in my KCL and Black Thrive role.

00:13:35 Sohail So access to university resources might help with a lot of things. I can see that. What I wanted to ask about is how are you taking these ideas that you're collecting from young people around stop and search and trying to make them a reality? Are they feeding into the training? Are they perhaps going to lead to future projects? What are your ideas?

00:14:01 Nathaniel So just due to ethics, I've not been able to directly engage young people just yet until I get ethics approval. So I'm not sure what the young people might say as of yet. But from their guardians or their gatekeepers, I've been trying—I've been speaking to people like youth clients and other community organisations, as well as the Lambeth Youth Offending Services. There's definitely young people with strong opinions on this that want to share their opinions. They want to share how they feel about these things. And I think—I'm not sure what the ideas might look like, about what training might look like. But young people have a say in all of that. So the workshop—the ideas workshops themselves, we're still in the process of planning what those workshops look like. The designing police and community training, that is also in its development and planning phase as well. But we do know that, yes, we will be very intentional in securing funding for any ideas that do come out of these ideas workshops. But I am really passionate about not just raising young people's hopes and then letting them down. But we have a mandate to try and fulfil those ideas. Particularly as they come directly from the young people. And I'm in a position of influence and power, let's say, to make these things happen.

00:15:27 Sohail Yeah. It's really tricky to try and plan for action when you don't know exactly what that might be. And I know I've found it difficult to manage expectations. For instance, I've said, "We're going to try and put what you say into action." And then if someone recommends, for instance, you know, "Tear down all borders." This is a little tricky.

00:16:01 Nathaniel [chuckles]

- 00:16:00 Sohail How are you thinking of managing young people's expectations? Obviously they're going to give a lot of themselves. And some things are going to be more feasible, some things are going to be less feasible. How do you explain that to people?
- 00:16:14 Nathaniel I think having them on board, not just to share their ideas, but having them on board for planning will hopefully help them to see how difficult some of these ideas might be to action. But it's one thing to say, "We want this. We want that." But sitting down with young people, talking to them about budgets, talking to them about timeframes, talking to them about the right people to speak to. They might begin to understand the complexity of these things. So that's where co-production is really important. So I think hopefully young people understand that there is definitely passion and desire to change things for the betterment of young people. And in my context, young Black people. But it's not without its barriers. So I think, again, my main thought process is just including them at every step and not leaving them out. And not going cold turkey on them once I do hit a barrier. But helping them to understand and be a part of that process as well.
- 00:17:20 Sohail Are you supported by—you mentioned that you were working with Black Thrive. And are you supported by activist groups and campaigning groups of a—you know, is there a sort of training or skill sharing or capacity sharing around trying to implement some of the findings you might come up with?
- 00:17:43 Nathaniel So as a part of our designing community and police training, I believe there are plans to exchange particular campaigners from the Black Lives Matter UK group. But as it stands, I can't comment further on engaging campaigners. But I think training young people in order to action the thing that they have brought up is really important. And another big part of my role is developing other community researchers. And hopefully through this Stop and Search Project, young people will come out of this wanting to dig in a little deeper into the issues around their area and trying to find ways to solve some issues that they're seeing. And hopefully I can provide some opportunities for them to do that. I know that there are plans in place to develop some online peer research training. Which will be free and available to anybody that may be interested.
- 00:18:41 Sohail And what do you think about how young people might feel around the police training? So it seems like this is a pre-defined outcome of your qualitative research. Do you feel like there might be some resistance in engaging with the police like this?
- 00:19:03 Nathaniel For sure. Without fail, I'm sure there will be some resistance. This training was pre-determined before I came. Which is something that—that, yeah, that has to be done. I think the reason why it's even in this process now—it should have been delivered already. I believe that the powers that be—I believe that the local council—wanted to get an external group in to do the training. But there was some resistance to that. Because it—that training wouldn't have involved local residents and local young people as a part of that training. So I think, again, just making sure that young people are aware of what's happening. And young people will have a position of power in this. And getting—and reminding them that, yeah, that their voice is going to be heard directly to those people that they believe to be mistreating them through stop and search. And through just general relationship with the police. I do think that there will be resistance. I understand that. And I appreciate that. Because I've—because I've had my own stop and search experiences myself. And I've—I've seen police conduct. Which is probably less than professional, to say the least. My angle is just reminding young people that they can be a part of the change. That we want them on board for this. And potentially through their work on the Stop and Search Project, young people in ten to twenty years' time won't have to deal with these same issues.
- 00:20:35 Sohail Yeah. I guess it's probably both a positive and a negative to have this pre-defined output in the sense—
- 00:20:50 Nathaniel Mhm.

- 00:20:51 Sohail —that you have something which tangibly is going to happen. You know that—that then it perhaps makes it harder for young people to—it takes a tiny bit of control away from the young people, I suppose.
- 00:21:01 Nathaniel Mm. Mhm.
- 00:21:02 Sohail So it's an interesting tension. And I wanted to ask are you—you know, you mentioned that you haven't engaged with campaigning groups yet. It would be great if you could go into that in a bit more detail. Why wait until the end of the process, and why not link in with some ongoing campaigns which might have already some pre-defined recommendations?
- 00:21:34 Nathaniel Yeah, sure. Just to respond back to your previous point about the pre-determined output, that's partially relieved through this project through the ideas workshop. So that's something that isn't restrained. And that's something young people can speak freely and openly, bringing their ideas about. And that's something that we hope to and plan to gather funding for to action some of those ideas. So these—these are the two strands that will hopefully run in tandem over the summer. One that is pre-determined. One that is just seeing what young people are about and the level of not knowing there. But there's also a willingness to engage young people for that. And then to answer your most recent question about engaging campaigners, I am a part of a group at Lambeth Council and the police called Disrupt and Deter, which are actioning the Lambeth Made Safer strategy and seeing what local residents, the council and the police can do to keep their community safer. And within that, there are streams of actions that, regarding stop and search. So even though I'm running this Stop and Search Project, there are other members of the council, there are police officers that are doing specific training with their own colleagues already around stop and search. I've also engaged with the community monitoring group in Lambeth regarding stop and search, where we get to watch body worn footage. So there is—there is a level of connecting with other people here already. There's no point in us acting individually and just duplicating or replicating the same thing. It makes sense to bring all ideas, knowledge and resources together to create an even better and stronger output.
- 00:23:14 Sohail Building on from that, how do you see this work in the bigger picture of fighting for race equality, I guess, or less discrimination?
- 00:23:32 Nathaniel Mhm.
- 00:23:33 Sohail Or in the context of, I guess, the recent protests across the world around Black Lives Matter? How do you see your research feeding into that bigger picture?
- 00:23:39 Nathaniel I hope that it will be taken seriously by the police. I hope that this training will lead to just generally better relationships and behaviour by the police. So one conversation that we've had already—are bringing up certain conversations, where we just want the police to have a conversation with people. Let them know what's going on. Keeping them well-informed, rather than creating a state of panic. And I feel like that's such a basic, human thing to do. Which makes this lasting change a bit more difficult. Because we're changing the nature of people's hearts. It's not just a specific power that they have. It's how they use that power. So in the long term, I would love if this project is a success. We see a reduction in the disproportionate stops of young Black people. We saw stop and searches happened with more integrity and respect. We saw stop and searches just lessen. And when they do happen, it's with better and greater intel. And then if that happens in Lambeth, then seeing that spread across the city and across the country. So that I think that's... that's the dream, you know. Of—yeah, reducing stop and searches. I wouldn't say eradicating them completely. But I think reducing them is important. Because I've seen some shocking statistics of the number of stops and searches, and the percentage of those that are actually positive, i.e. finding an illegal weapon or substance on someone.
- 00:25:18 Sohail I—as a last question—just really following on from that. So I'm thinking what happens if the young people you work with are saying, "Actually, we would like to eradicate stop

and search. Actually, we would like to see less funding go to police and more into youth clubs,” for instance?

00:25:47 Nathaniel Yeah. Yeah.

00:25:50 Sohail How—you know, I guess that is—you know, heading towards more structural change. So how do you—

00:26:02 Nathaniel Mhm.

00:26:03 Sohail —work with that and try and apply, you know, some quite big fundamental ideas which, you know, might—I imagine will at least be discussed in the groups.

00:26:11 Nathaniel Yeah. Yeah. For sure. Yeah, the young people of today are a lot more aware of these potential outcomes. And like, these ideas and I would acknowledge them, but —so I am expecting that. I think one thing I know that I have to do is present their ideas. [chuckles] And allow them to present their ideas. I think—and this is the brilliant thing about this partnership. So it won't just be me, like, there's these pro bono lawyers, I mentioned already. Hopefully, we'll get activism campaigns like BLM on board. Where we can reason these things and speak about them. And you know, the pros and cons. However, I think at the end of the day, if this does come out of this ideas workshop, then I feel like there's a mandate there to investigate that and to explore that further. I think—I'm not sure if I made it clear already. But there's very good communication with police, with the Lambeth and Southwark DCU, currently. And I think they—I know it's a—I think a [inaudible 00:27:22] of trying to develop police trust and relationships with the Black communities in London. I think, yeah, that the police are very aware of how they are viewed in Black communities. So in regards to your question around, like, young people wanting to defund the police and young people wanting to direct funding to other—into other areas, yeah, I think—yeah, you—I've just come from youth—from the youth centre in terms of my career, and yeah, it could do with a lot more funding. So I'm pro pumping money into that. But again, I think the one thing I can do is allow their ideas to be presented. Allow those ideas to be developed. And recruiting people that might have better knowledge and expertise than myself to help really flesh things out. But again, yeah. If there's a—there's a mandate there to explore the idea, to figure out what that actually looks like rather than just saying it. And saying it because it's quite popular at the moment. But yeah, let's—let's figure out what this looks like together. Let's do that.

00:28:35 Sohail Excellent. Thank you so much. That's really great. And very considered. So that's—that's all from us today. Thank you so much for your time, Nathaniel. I just wanted to ask you if there was anything you wanted to end with. If there's anything you want to publicise around your work and any way that people can get in touch with you and find out more about what you do?

00:28:59 Nathaniel I want to end it with saying that, “Young people, you have more power than you think. Please tap into that. And please tap into the other people around you. Put pressure on us. Ask us questions. Don't feel like you need to be silent.” I—if people look out for the launch to Stop and Search Project mid to late July. I currently have young people that are interested in this. But there will be more information on our flyer. My e-mail address, it is nathaniel.martin@kcl.ac.uk. And I also have my Black Thrive e-mail address, which is the same: nathaniel.martin@blackthrive.org. nathaniel.martin@blackthrive.org. So yeah. Contact me via e-mail. And let's see how we can go forward.

[End of recording]