Anti-racist Qualitative Health Research: Being Anti-racist in How We Share Qualitative Research with Ricardo Twumasi

Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
- Ricardo Twumasi (Speaker) (Ricardo)

[downtempo electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:12]

00:00:12 Sohail	Hi. I am Sohail Jannesari and welcome to the Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre's, mercifully short to QUAHRC, podcast series on anti-racist qualitative research. In this series, we look at whether, how and to what extent qualitative health research can contribute towards anti-racism and decolonisation. We take a journey through qualitative research, exploring how theoretical framings, topics, the process of doing research, the results of research and sharing findings can impact and contribute to the cause of anti-racism. Today we're very lucky, we've got with us Dr Ricardo Twumasi, who is a lecturer at King's College. Do you want to introduce yourself, Ricardo?
00:00:57 Ricardo	Thanks, Sohail. I am a lecturer within the IPPN and my research interests are all around equality in the workplace and health in the workplace. I actually think those are quite connected; if we have an equal workplace, that is ideally a more healthy workplace. So I'm generally doing work trying to reduce discrimination, change stereotypes and decolonise a whole bunch of different aspects of academia.
00:01:27 Sohail	Wicked. So can you tell me a bit about the *Stolen Tools* journal and how you got started with it and how it plays into some of the interests you're talking about?
00:01:36 Ricardo	Yeah. It's really interesting how we first got started. So we were putting together some research methods module stuff, and I remember you pre-recorded some great lectures on qualitative research. And I remember the first time I contacted you I was like—I was emailing you asking you, "How do I pronounce your name?" Because I had to do an intro to your lecture for that week. So that was, like, how we first got in contact with each other. And then I remember you talking about yarning within that lecture, which was really interesting because the previous year I'd been at the Australian Psychological Society's conference in Adelaide and they talked about yarning. And, yeah, it was really great to see that being used as an example of non-Western ways of gathering knowledge. And then from there, in that kind of mutual respect of each other's attempts to decolonise, as you said, like to hamfist it into any teaching you could. You invited me to join your application to the REIEF, the Race and Inclusive Education Fund, for some money to start up *Stolen Tools*. And as soon as you said, "Hey, you want to start an anti-racist journal?" I just thought, "Right. I'm in." It's the kind of thing that needs to happen and there's so much inequality within publishing, there's so much marginalisation within academia, it just spoke to me instantly. So, yeah, we collaborated a bit on that. You were successful getting that funding and then since, just the other day, launched the website, which looks amazing. And I feel like you're doing some great work in turning some of the really toxic parts of academic publishing on its head and actually saying, "Right. We're not just going to be gatekeepers having a limited non-diverse group of people saying what knowledge is valuable."
00:03:13 Sohail	Thanks Ricardo. That's very kind of you. I just want to know, so what do you think this journal can achieve in terms of trying to tackle racism in academia or more broadly in terms of, like, health inequalities? Like, what can it do?
00:03:29 Ricardo	I think it can do so much. I think it's really well timed. So after the death of George Floyd and the resurgence and the kind of popularity of the Black Lives Matter movement, I feel like a lot of people who hadn't really engaged with inequality, especially for racialised groups, started to—especially in academia, started to make nods to this. And almost every academic institution released a statement on race inequality, and you had the Wellcome Trust's not only statement but also their recognition of their part that they played within systemic racism within research. And we have all these massive changes in our realisation of something that through my whole life I've known deeply, and then through my academic career it's been something I've been really passionate about researching. And now, 2020, it feels like it had some real importance. And *Nature* recently had a special issue where the white editors stepped aside and had four associate editors of colour. And that just—that

spoke to me so much. Having a journal like *Nature* realising, "Okay, we need to be quiet and listen to some other voices here and understand what's going on with inequality in the field," was quite amazing. There's a special issue of a really interesting journal within my field called *Organization Studies*, which is doing the same thing as *Nature*. They've got four guest editors of colour, and I'm currently writing a paper on inequality within publishing for them. So there's a lot of change that's happening now and what *Stolen Tools* can do, I think it can get a lot of younger people who hadn't thought about publishing into the possibility of publishing. Mentor a lot of younger people. It can give people a voice they haven't had it before and do a lot more to change a lot of the questionable things. Like the Reviewer 2, we can just stamp down on that process. I think peer review is a good process, but I think it should be open. I think it should be constructive. I think there should be more mentoring and less gatekeeping. And I feel like you are doing all of those things and that's what I feel *Stolen Tools* can add. What else—Sohail, what do you think *Stolen Tools* can add?

00:05:28 Sohail

I think you've very nicely and succinctly summarised all the hopes we have of a journal. I think maybe one thing to pick up is trying to show how knowledge can come in so many different forms, and we need to value knowledge coming from all backgrounds, all different sort of educational statuses. And, you know, I remember, for instance, reading Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and it's basically almost a stream of consciousness. It's—or is it *Black Skins, White Masks* is more a stream of conscious? But they're—but, you know, it's not like lots of referencing, it's kind of really raw and really spoke to me. And I think that's something that maybe has been lost a bit in academia, or a lot in academia. [chuckles] That sort of not appreciating different types of knowledge.

00:06:18 Ricardo

I'm so happy you mentioned *Wretched of the Earth*. That's—on my new decolonised module that's like one of the core readings. And I'm a lecturer that kind of currently spans a lot of psychology, but also some psychiatry, in terms of mental health at work and stuff like that. And as a researcher who's been interested in diversity, and I've been really quite passionate about reducing discrimination, I only really engaged with Fanon's writings in about 2018; about four years ago. And even though I remember reading the foreword by Sartre of *Wretched of the Earth* and just being like, "Wow!" And I love Marx and *Das Kapital* and to not have found out about this in school when I was reading *Das Kapital* says it all. Like, there are history teachers who could have guided me towards Fanon, but they wouldn't have even though this book came out in what? '61, '62. I'm so happy you mentioned *Wretched of the Earth*. I feel like this is our ability to now guide things in a more pluralistic, in terms of voices, direction. Where we can now say, "Hey, these are the people that need to be read." I mean, the section on violence is hard to read within *The Wretched of the Earth*. I actually—this is in the forefront of my mind because there's—I'm doing a lecture on that particular book and it's difficult because Fanon talks a lot about how violence can be a liberating force. And it's one of the only ways to overcome being colonised, is to take back power through violence. And part of the reason it becomes quite stream of consciousness is he was going blind at the time, he just recorded this and then it was transcribed from that while he was really ill in his last year of life. It's amazing that he was able to write something so brilliant in that particular state. But also it was written at a time where Algeria were fighting for freedom and through the activism he was doing and the work as a psychiatrist, seeing these really shocking cases. I'm just so happy. We actually haven't talked about that book before, but yeah, I haven't read *Black Skins, White Masks* but I need to read that one as well. Tell me a bit about your views on Fanon.

00:08:13 Sohail

Yeah. So I found that book really inspirational, *Wretched of the Earth*, and I agree with you about some of the really sort of tricky and frank and direct ways that Fanon speaks to the reader about how decolonisation happens. There's no real sugarcoating. [chuckles] There's a lot on mental health generally in Fanon's writing, so I find it interesting that violence is a part of the method of decolonising the mind and cleansing the mind. So I found it really, really inspirational. And I used it in my research as one of the main sort of theoretical authors I was drawing on. So when I looked at people's experiences of the asylum process and kind of framed that as a post-colonial encounter between the Home Office coloniser, and the colonised asylum applicant. And Fanon

was really, really relevant still in helping me interpret my findings. Helping me—for instance, the role of the diaspora, I found really interesting; that the diaspora aren't necessarily pro-migration, and how the diaspora can sort of interpret the coloniser's words for the people who are being oppressed. And that kind of speaks to a lot of what Fanon was talking about in intellectual classes who actually are sometimes complicit in colonisation. So it's really, really fascinating. And I think it's quite relevant because we did a series just now where we looked at how we can use theory in qualitative research, because qualitative research can be a bit atheoretical. And this sort of stuff really push you to think much, much more deeply about what people are telling you, and in a more historical way.

00:10:06 Ricardo   Yeah, different lenses of history. And also having that freedom now as academics. I think you definitely have that now as a postdoc, and I'm sure you did as a PhD student, to be able to cite someone and reference someone. Obviously I think you were lucky to have the advisors that you had as well. I think has some really useful things to say about some really, really difficult topics.

00:10:26 Sohail   Yeah, absolutely. So I wanted to ask you a bit more about the process of decolonising academia. It's quite a buzzword, I would say. Everyone is decolonising in some way. [chuckles]

00:10:39 Ricardo   Yeah.

00:10:39 Sohail   And even EDI is starting to use that sort of terminology.

00:10:43 Ricardo   [laughs] They've co-opted it. Sorry, I find that so funny. I did a talk recently for a housing association, a charity, and it was the EDI department that asked me to do this talk. And I'm critical of EDI. I think EDI is a bandage on a severed limb. It's often a PR exercise. Sometimes there are really good people trying to do really good stuff. But in my view, decolonisation is radical change, recognising historic inequalities and it's the transfer of power. It's revolutionary in my mind. This is where decolonisation in my mind came from. When you think back to like the origin of the term and countries taking back their freedom from colonialised power, it's a different process to EDI. I actually don't do EDI work. Yeah, I would argue that my work is much more towards decolonisation, and when people read the work that I've done on equality, it makes sense that I have these utopian radicalised ideas that often aren't ever going to be implemented but this is the change that we've seen. So obviously the—when we think of decolonisation in the higher education context, we're talking about 2015 and the Rhodes Must Fall movement. South Africa, and then it moved over to Oxford and through the UK. And it started off being about getting rid of these old white men, getting rid of these old statues. And I think the reason for that was, it was a very grassroots movement and it was about people without power saying, "Hey, I don't want to be taught this. Why is my lecturer white? Why is my curriculum white? Where are the other histories? Where is the rest of the world? Where's the recognition of pluralistic voices?" And so I'm now in this position of power where I'm an academic at a Russell Group university, and I've recognised that what I have to do and what I try to do within my efforts to decolonise—I mean, I've recently been lucky enough to have a module approved which is called Decolonising Mental Health Research, and within that module all I'm trying to do is give back power and recognise diverse voices. Some ideas that came in there from Abbie Hoffman and *System of a Down*, there's a lecture called *Decolonise This Lecture*, it's just blank. It's like *Steal This Album*, *Steal This Book*, and the students are going to tell me what to put into that lecture. Their marks are decided by them. They can assign themselves fifteen credits. Somehow the higher ups of the university have recognised the need for this. I actually had an interview with Funmi a few weeks ago, and she was really particularly impressed at that part. And I was able to do that from having this idea that came from a group of masters and PhD students who are my advisory group, realising we need to give power back and then having some support from the university. I mean, it's not been without its pitfalls. They should have actually launched a year before, probably thought it was too radical. Correct. It probably is. In terms of decolonisation, there is a continuum. On the softest level it's just changing a reading list, adding a few Black authors. A Jannesari here, a Twumasi

there to a reading list. And then the stuff in the middle is really consulting with the students, being really inclusive and saying, "Okay. What can I change? How can I give back some power? How can we co-create inclusively?" That middle areas is where I hope people will get to. And then at the extreme end, the radical end, is the overturning the—even the concept of university, the idea of top-down learning. The Fanonian stuff, the Paulo Freire stuff. Getting rid of the banking model of education and instead trying to think about a more collaborative model of learning, giving back all power and recognising that, "Hey, education can be oppression, but done properly education is freedom." I mean, I think I've been so lucky that a lot of the freedom I've had within my life, especially to overcome marginalisation, has come from education. What do you think though? What do you think decolonise—I feel like I want to know what you think about these questions as well. Tell me what your views—people's views on decolonisation are so different. Sohail, what are your views on what is decolonisation?

00:14:40 Sohail   I probably wouldn't put things like changing the reading list on; I think you're being very kind there. I would—I think it does include structural change. I think it probably does end at some dismantling of the university. And this is something that I've read about a bit where people will criticise decolonisation because it doesn't speak to reparations. It doesn't speak to that accountability which is needed in decolonisation. So I think there's got to be some sort of outward movement and some—also reflection to sort of acknowledge what has happened, why the system and the position is in the current state, but also how can we recompense people for lifetimes of loss? So I don't know what that looks like and I don't know what this compensation and recompense looks like, but I think it is a really fundamental part of decolonisation which is often missed.

00:15:39 Ricardo   Yeah. I think you're really right about that. That the way I tend to talk about reparative justice is that obviously I think it is an important part of decolonisation. But, from a practical standpoint, it's really dark but the way I see reparative justice is—reparations specifically, let's take slavery specifically. They've actually been paid and they were paid to the slave owners. And other than actions to overturn entire power structures of nations, there aren't going to be significant steps that would be real reparative justice. I think we just have to chip away at that, do what we can to try to reach some sort of convergence of where the world would be if we'd acted ethically when European nations explored and pillaged the world.

00:16:22 Sohail   Yeah. It is for sure a tricky one. I'm going to ask a bit more of a specific question now, to think about health research in particular. So are there things that you want to see in health research and in qualitative health research around decolonisation? Like what would it look like?

00:16:37 Ricardo   Are there things I want to see? Yeah. So this week I've been on a machine learning late summer school, and there was something really interesting that came out of this. One of the reason I'm getting into machine learning is to try and use automated systems to understand and reduce the amount of discrimination within the workplace. And one of the speakers had this really interesting statistic. They were doing a talk on representativeness of samples, and they were talking about pulse oximetry. And they said that a Black patient has nearly three times the frequency of occult hypoxemia that was not detected by pulse oximetry as a white patient and how this dark skin responds differently to the wavelengths of a pulse oximeter. Now, I know that's a bit of a niche thing, but it really blew my mind that the problem here was that in the samples when they were designing pulse oximeters, they didn't have people with dark skin. They were designing pulse oximeters, these life-saving devices that show you what the saturation level of oxygen in your bloodstream is; they can be used in a lot of different situations, but these can be life or death devices. And to not take into account darker skinned patients when you're designing that, and then years later to be like, "People of colour die more in all sorts of situations." And now having a paper in the New England Journal of Medicine in 2020 saying, "Oh, we've discovered one of the reasons why we killed people." It's an opportunity to make change and to increase the diversity of the people that we speak to and really deeply understand why these health inequalities happen. But it's also really depressing that people outside of my area, people outside of

discrimination, are only really starting to make nods to these inequalities. I think a lot of this was COVID, I think, plus Black Lives Matter. COVID so terribly decimated marginalised communities and for a while leading scientists couldn't really tell you why. And, yeah, not being able to say, "Hey, why is this disease having such worse outcomes for people of colour than white people?" Especially in the UK, was such a nod to the fact that, "Hey, there were people that have done research on similar things. Their voices weren't necessarily being heard within these leading pieces of research on what COVID was doing to the community."

00:18:50 Sohail	Thanks, Ricardo. And that's kind of depressing, but it also—in the context of our podcast, like it does speak to maybe what qualitative health researchers can do to further the cause of anti-racism. I wondered if you could speak a bit about what an aspiring anti-racist qualitative health researcher could be looking at and how their work can feed into a larger movement.
00:19:15 Ricardo	Yeah, so firstly, it's interesting, this idea of a qualitative researcher. So I've done quite a bit of qualitative research. I've probably done as much qualitative as I have done quantitative research, and part of that is because I try and answer questions. I'm interested in questions of inequality, injustice, health and fairness. These are the kind of areas that I'm interested in so I'll pose the problem. For instance, why do people have worse outcomes if they're in a marginalised community? And then we'll try and apply as many different methods as I feel relevant to answer those questions. And one of the most relevant methods to understand why marginalised communities, for instance, have lower vaccine uptake, is to speak to them. To speak to them as a peer, being able to relate with the experience through language, through the way that they're approached, through recruitment. To speak to these marginalised communities to really deeply understand why it is that a person from a certain community might be more vaccine sceptical than another community. And you can't do this well or potentially at all from a survey. The data will show you the uptake difference. The 'why', the 'what's going on in the mind of a person when they're trying to make that health decision for themselves', the understanding of the distrust, understanding conspiracy theories, understanding different community views on even things such as ingredients, like the ingredients that are put within vaccines. Often these are a choice. They could choose to not have alcohol. Some vaccines don't have alcohol in them. And yes, there is just tiny amounts, but if it was more recognised that certain things should just never go into a vaccine, then alternatives would have been sought. And these aren't the answers, but these are the ways of thinking. And I also recognise my—like, in my reflexivity I recognise my kind of privilege and current position in terms of being able to understand and relate to these communities, as maybe a newer researcher or a researcher who identifies with a different belief system or something like this. But, yeah, talking to people widely and answering questions that are really difficult and challenging that the broad population data is suggesting, "Hey, we have this problem. We're not sure why this community is having this issue." And that's where qualitative research in health is just so invaluable.
00:21:33 Sohail	Thanks for that. I think it was really interesting for me during the COVID uptake debates, the shock that certain communities were less likely to take vaccinations. It was complete forgetting of history and—
00:21:47 Ricardo	Yeah, Tuskegee. That's what—I remember saying this to one of my friends who's a medic, just didn't understand this at all. And my instant reply was Tuskegee and they didn't know about the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. And I said, "QED. Like, that is—come on! [chuckles] The fact that you didn't even know that this happened." Sorry, I totally interrupted you there.
00:22:05 Sohail	No, it's an excellent point. And it was surprising; sometimes we remove the history from research and where it really should be central to what we do. So I wanted to ask a bit about how we share findings as researchers, as qualitative health researchers. Like are there ways in which findings can be shared to be a bit more accessible, a bit more informative? Does that help contribute to, I guess, the cause of anti-racism? Is there something about that? And I guess this links back to the start of our podcast where we

talked about *Stolen Tools* journal and what it aims to do. So I just wanted to get a bit of insights onto how researchers should be thinking about sharing their findings to promote anti-racism.

00:22:48 Ricardo   Yeah. The dissemination problem. So I guess as a qualitative anti-racist researcher, you have two problems. If you have a piece of research that's both qualitative and anti-racist, it's that generally, academic journals, the normal method of dissemination favour quantitative research. And there's a lot of evidence to show that. There have even been some brilliant open letters to suggest that, "Hey, we should publish more qualitative work as well." So you have that problem. Then you have the problem that research on anti-racism, research that overcomes systemic inequality, isn't commonly published in lots of places. And obviously that is one of the motivations that we have in creating *Stolen Tools*: being an outlet for that work exactly. An additional thing that I think you're doing with *Stolen Tools* which is brilliant is just recognising different bonds of dissemination. Different ways of sharing data. The standard academic journal article was made for experimental study. It has a very clear experimental process with introduction, methods, results, discussion; that kind of format. And the qualitative research community has kind of fit into that box, but it doesn't necessarily have to. I mean, for some of my research I used some creative nonfiction to create some videos where I took apart lots of different aspects of interviews that I had and turned them into representative cases that were just few minute long videos to explain, "Hey, here's an archetype of an experience that I've had." And these were types of workers who had experienced discrimination and we're turning them into different archetypes and then we just threw those on YouTube. And with qualitative research, you've got this richness of data that can also be disseminated in a much more direct way with general population than you potentially can with some other types of research. So I think we have some—I say 'we', researchers have a brilliant opportunity to really just share this work as widely as possible in creative ways: working with artists, working with filmmakers. That's something I've done before, working with a filmmaker on some creative nonfiction videos and disseminating. Not always writing specifically for an academic audience. I feel like theory and different ideological approaches to qualitative and philosophical approaches, we can actually fall into the trap of becoming so hard to digest that our work doesn't become easy to read by the general population. So that can be quite sad, to have just spoken to someone from a lay population and then turned what they've said into something that a person from the lay population probably wouldn't even want to read. So amplifying voices there, I think, is really important as well.

00:25:22 Sohail   Thanks so much, Ricardo. That's really good points. And I think personally I really feel what you're saying about we are writing still in an experimental science set up. And I don't feel like journals so far have given me permission. Not explicitly, but I don't feel like I have the permission to be creative in the way I write. Even if it's for a qualitative journal, because it's so ingrained in training, in my reading, in everything, that I'm just afraid that if I branch out a bit I'm going to be rejected.

00:25:58 Ricardo   Yeah. I—that's just so true. So, this is interesting. [chuckles] I was doing some research on neurodiversity in the workplace. We were doing this big study about people's experiences of discrimination within the workplace if they were neurodiverse. And I just had this idea that came to me from the folktales that I grew up and these kind of Akan-Ashanti folktales of Anansi. I was thinking about the problem at the core of neurodiversity, which is: do we celebrate this? Do we recognise the difference and the positivity of that difference or do we medicalise this and recognise it as a disorder? Which sadly, I think, unfortunately is what historically has been done to the detriment of a lot of people. It might have helped some people, but generally I think this has created a lot of discrimination and stigma around neurodiversity. And I had this idea and I just wrote a thousand word tale, Akan folktale. And I sent it to a colleague of mine and they were like, "Oh, this is really interesting." Probably a bit mad, but he was like, "It's a shame you can't publish stuff like this." And I remember thinking, "I wrote this because I want to publish something like this." I found Nick Bostrom, a researcher on the future of humanity, had also written a folktale before. And I'd done my PhD on aging so I actually had that in the back of my mind because he'd written this parable

of—basically called the concept of aging a dragon. And he was arguing—it was a really interesting analogy in terms of the way that we fight this dragon of aging and all of the systems that we create to placate the dragon rather than fight the dragon of aging. Anyway, I ended up finding a non-conventional journal. I did submit this purposely to three or four different very academic journals. And they didn't even have places that I could really submit this type of stuff, I just submitted it as an editorial. It wasn't an editorial, it was a folktale that I just made up. And in the end a journal called *Ought*, a journal of autistic culture, actually ended up publishing this. And so it can be done, but the fact that it's taken me this number of years in my career and then it probably took a good few months of pushing in terms of actually getting something like that published. And just the fact that it's so challenging to even decide, "You know what? I'm going to talk about this problem," or, "I'm going to try and conceptualise something in this problem in a non-conventional manner." Or in my case, I was taking a concept of a folktale that came from my culture. And that's, once again, where I think *Stolen Tools* comes in. Because whenever we have these ideas, we're always trying to make nods to these more diverse voices and recognising just different types of submissions. I was really happy we got a submission the other day that was different and I really like that. Because I was actually worried that we were only going to get people approaching *Stolen Tools* with submissions that were at least trying to be academic. And that's really great, when someone submits something that's much more creative and recognising a problem and talking about it in lots of different ways. The final thing. I randomly decided to get John Barnes's book on racism, a footballer, and it taught me so much. A different approach to—I've been researching racism for over the last twelve years or so, and experiencing it my whole life. And I'd never really—like, pro footballers' lived experience of racism, I'd never really engaged with it. I remember thinking, "Wow! This is—I need to read more non-academic books on racism. All I ever read is psychological theories of discrimination and heuristics and biases." But yeah, lived experience, it's so important as well.

00:29:12 Sohail | Absolutely. Thank you so much for that, and thank you so much for being with us today. I think that's almost all we've got time for, but can you just give the listeners a few links or books or papers where they can follow your work and all the interesting stuff you're doing?

00:29:28 Ricardo | Yeah. I'll share some links of some work that I've mentioned. That *Fable of Neuroplastic Lyra*, I'll share that. And then most importantly, the link to either submit as an author to *Stolen Tools*, all sorts of diverse types of work. Art, stories, academic work, all sorts of creative stuff we hope will get submissions. And we'll pay authors. We're lucky enough to have funding from King's College, the Race Equality Inclusion Education Fund and the library for that. So I think that'll be a really important link to share and I really hope that people consider submitting to that. And also we could do with some mentors as well. So there's a section on that site. If you would like to mentor someone, if you feel like you have the skills to take an early career young academic or an author who hasn't really considered publishing in this way and guide them through the process. Because Sohail's idea is to accept people before papers and people who haven't necessarily written this type of work before, and guiding them and peer reviewing in kind of an open, inclusive way. It might be a real change from being Reviewer 2.

00:30:30 Sohail | Thank you so much. [downtempo electronic music fades in] That was great plugs. So much appreciated. Thank you Ricardo and thanks to the listeners. So thanks for joining us. Much appreciated. [music fades out]

[End of recording]