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Qualitative Conundrums: Impact with Harriet Boulding

Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
- Harriet Boulding (Speaker) (Harriet)

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[downtempo electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:09]

- 00:00:09 Sohail Hi, I'm Sohail Jannesari, a migrant rights researcher and activist. I'm here to welcome you to the *Qualitative Open Mic* podcast. This series is about 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 are they actively created?" At the Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre, mercifully shortened to QUAHRC, we aim to make space for these debates, and this series wants to tackle the fundamental questions that plague qualitative researchers. Today, we're very lucky to have with us Dr Harriet Boulding, who leads for health work at the Policy Institute at King's College London. Harriet, would you like to introduce yourself?
- 00:01:04 Harriet Hi. Yes. Thank you for having me. So, yes, I'm Harriet Boulding. I lead the health work at the institute. We are a department with a bit of a difference. We do standard academic work, but we are very much focused on having an impact with that work. So we do a range of qualitative and quant projects, but the overarching theme is that we want to make sure that our research gets into practice and, ultimately, improves people's lives.
- 00:01:33 Sohail Great. Thank you. So could you start off by telling us what impact means in the context of qualitative health research?
- 00:01:41 Harriet Sure. This is a good question. Impact has been defined quite differently over the years, and, indeed, the Research Excellence Framework, which is the system that the government uses to assess universities, does seem to reinvent itself every seven years or so as well. So it's not as simple as you might think, but at a very basic level, what we're talking about is making sure that academic research improves lives beyond universities. So, essentially, it has a real-world impact in society.
- 00:02:14 Sohail Interesting. So if a piece of research looked at reforming university structures, that's not the sort of impact you're interested in?
- 00:02:24 Harriet No, I think that would definitely be—passes a real-world impact. I mean, just from an academic perspective, we're not just talking about publishing papers. So—and, you know, we don't say that we've had impact with our research if we publish papers, but if those papers have then become translated into a real-world change, and that could be within a university, or it could be in broader society, then that, we would say, has had an impact.
- 00:02:51 Sohail Great. Thanks. And how do you ensure that qualitative health research has an impact?
- 00:02:54 Harriet So, I mean, to me, qualitative research is one of the best ways to have an impact because one of the main ways in which we can ensure that we have the best chance of doing that is to build relationships with the people that we're doing our project with. So this could be trusts. It could be nurses, different types of practitioners. It could be community health workers. It could be local or national policymakers in health. But whoever you are working with, you need a good relationship with them. They need to understand your project to buy into your project, and that is a really, really good place to start. And, as we know, the key to a good qualitative interview is also building up that trust, building up a good relationship.
- 00:03:44 Sohail Fascinating. So does impact always have to go through someone, i.e. organisations or partners?
- 00:03:52 Harriet I think that's a really key part of it. Yes. One thing that we say when we're asking people to build research impact in from the start of your work is to make sure that your stakeholders are on board with the project from the start. And there will always be

somebody that you need to be invested in your work, whether that's, you know, patients or the public who will, ultimately, you know, be on the receiving end of your research. Or if it's an intervention, or whether it's medical practitioners who will be using your ideas somehow in their practice, you need people to be invested in it.

00:04:30 Sohail

Alright. And how do you get them invested?

00:04:33 Harriet

So I think, first of all, it's having a good idea. So good research at its basic level is more likely to have an impact because, you know, practitioners and policymakers who are very experienced will be able to see the value in that. Another part of it is being able to explain it in a way that is accessible to different people beyond the university. So just as when you're doing a qualitative interview, you do your best to make it accessible. You don't use very technical language. You make it more of a friendly conversation. And that's the best way to go forward with a lot of interviews like that. It's the same with organising impact for a project. So you build up those relationships. You have friendly conversations, and you explain the research in a way that's understandable. And we have a number of different techniques that we can use to help convey what we want to do. So for a standard piece of research, you'd have a participant information sheet. But if you are dealing with policymakers, or you just want to make them aware of the work that you've been doing so far, you can do accessible policy briefs, which is sort of one pager using accessible language. You know, making sure that it's message led so the most important points are there at the beginning for them to see. So, in that way, it's quite similar to a qualitative interview.

00:05:58 Sohail

Thanks for that. That actually harks back to a podcast series we did earlier on what counts as qualitative research, where we tried to learn lessons for qualitative research from other fields. So that's really appreciated. Now, my next question is on the different types of impact. So, obviously, you work for the Policy Institute. Is policy impact the main sort of impact you are concerned with? And is that the most important type of impact?

00:06:30 Harriet

I think policy impact is much broader than people think it is, is the first thing I'd like to say. So when we think about policy impact, people often think, "Well, this is going to be big national level. This is going to be a sort of core change in the Department of Health, or it's going to be a change in the NICE guidelines, or something that will have a wide ranging impact on a national level." But I think, actually, you know, a lot of policy change happens at a very local level. It can even be within a hospital department, and in some ways, that can have more of a lasting effect on people's lives and experiences. So, first of all, policy impact is much broader than you might think. But I wouldn't say there's—there, you know, aren't other areas where having those sorts of impacts would be really important. It just depends on your approach to your project. So policy is one of a number of ways in which you can have a good impact on people's lives.

00:07:32 Sohail

That's really useful because when I think of policy, I think of politicians and large-scale national thinking. But you're saying that universities can have policies. NHS trusts can have policies, and policy can be quite small scale.

00:07:48 Harriet

Absolutely. I mean, we can even look at within staff groups within hospital departments. You know, in work that I've done previously in hospital trusts, I've seen different policies being developed and enacted within the same department. So, actually, this is where qualitative research really comes into its own to help you understand those sorts of dynamics because if you ask, "What is the policy for this trust?" You'll be told one thing. But when you actually get into the nitty-gritty of how people are operating on a daily basis, through your observations or your qualitative interviews, you start to understand that policy is a lot more complicated. And, therefore, having impact with your research needs to understand those day-to-day experiences that people have.

00:08:41 Sohail

Thanks for that. That's really useful. But what would you say to a master's student who's doing a dissertation for whom maybe even a small-scale policy change would be quite a big thing to do?

- 00:08:57 Harriet So I think having impact can feel like an uphill struggle, but, actually, if you follow those steps of really understanding from the beginning that this is ultimately about relationships, it's about understanding your participants and their needs and who their networks are and how their organisations work, if you put in that legwork from the start, then your project has a much greater chance of success. So what I would say to master's and PhD students is before you go in and do your qualitative interviews or observations, I would suggest getting to know your participants first, getting to know the organisations, you know, who makes the decisions in those particular areas, you know, who are the leaders, both, you know, locally and regionally, whatever's relevant to your project. But if you have that network in place, then those are people that are already interested in your work. So, then, once you've done it, and you say, "These are the findings," you're not just coming at them cold saying, "Hi. I did this research. Here's what I found." These are people that you already know, and when you say, "This is what I found," they'll say, "Oh, yes, I've been thinking about that," hopefully. You know, and then you've set them up to be interested in your work, and they're already invested in it. And I think that is probably one of the most important elements of having impact with your research.
- 00:10:27 Sohail Thank you. So I am a migration researcher, and the field I work in is a very politically hostile one, where even small-scale policy change is going to be difficult to achieve. So do you think there's a role in impact for campaigners and activists?
- 00:10:48 Harriet Absolutely, yes. And I can definitely see with the example that you've given and many other areas as well, even areas that you wouldn't necessarily think would be controversial. For example, we were looking recently at trying to get a new health technology into practice, and what we essentially want to do is to improve screening practices. And this would seem, you know, not controversial at all, but the fact is it's still not a priority for the government, especially not at the moment when it's hard to get anything on the radar. So, yeah, at that point, you need to think more broadly about who your stakeholders are. So, obviously, you've got government stakeholders and those sorts of decisionmakers, but what you want to do there is to widen the public's understanding of the issue and get momentum around it. So, at that point, yes, there's very much a part for—to play for activist organisations. You know, I'd be saying, "Who can we link with? Who can get our research out there? Who would be interested in these findings? Who would be interested in campaigning on them?" So, yes, I'd absolutely support that.
- 00:11:55 Sohail So what are some of the best examples of impact? And I know this is putting you a bit on the spot, but what are some of the best examples of impact you've seen in health research?
- 00:12:06 Harriet Absolutely. I mean, King's is a community-focused university, and because of that, I'm spoiled for choice when I think about the wonderful real-world impacts that we've had. But I think the one that really comes to mind is King's involvement in the Ebola response in the outbreak of 2013. And this is a really good example of how having your networks in place and, really, those relationships can help because, at the time of the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, we already had, you know, student doctors out there, and staff members were already working out there. And when it became clear that there was an emergency, they were already there on the ground ready to go. And they, actually, in many ways, had more success than the British government or the military in responding to the Ebola outbreak. And they did an extraordinary job out there, and they've been appropriately honoured for that since. And the reason is, is because, you know, unlike the other actors involved, they were already there. They had the relationships. They had the trust, and that was a really solid basis for doing the excellent work that they did and putting the research that they were doing there into practice.
- 00:13:29 Sohail Thanks for that. That's really appreciated. So I've heard the word impact bandied around a lot. I remember at the beginning of entering academia, I was in a meeting where I asked the speaker, "What impact has your work had?" And they answered that

there has been a lot of papers published. And that reminded me of what you said and how publishing papers isn't quite the impact that you are looking for. So do you think there needs to be a culture change in academia?

00:14:04 Harriet So this is interesting to me. A couple of years ago, I did a research study of my own looking at exactly this question: the academics' approach, you know, to impact. And I interviewed a wide range of PIs, principal investigators, from a number of different health projects, and I found very different understandings of what impact is. So it ranged from PIs who said, you know, "We really want to make a real-world change with our research, but, you know, we struggle because there's not enough funding for it," or, "We don't have the resources in some way or another, the capacity," which makes complete sense. To others who gave, you know, that more traditional answer that, "Well, we can't have an impact with our research until it's published basically. That's what we need to do. We need to publish our papers, and then that's our job done." So I certainly think there is a need for a culture shift, but it's not necessarily across the board. I think it really depends on individual departments and researchers. I think many, you know, departments and universities as a whole are really, you know, quite sophisticated in the ways that they think about impact. And, in some ways, its funders, really, that need to catch up with them. You know, in turn, I think, you know, again, funders are doing better at this, too. They are increasingly asking researchers to talk about impact and how they're going to have it, but I think they could be doing more certainly in terms of being prepared to fund the kind of activities that it can take to have that impact.

00:15:49 Sohail What funders do you sort of see today who are getting to grips with impact?

00:15:53 Harriet Well, so in health in particular, NIHR is the biggest. This National Institute of Health Research is the biggest funder of health research in the country. And I know they are very, very concerned to make sure that the work that they fund has a real-world impact. That's, you know, why the organisation exists. They are an interesting example because, you know, they have a broader term which they use for this, and they call it knowledge mobilisation. And this—you know, it's something separate to disseminating findings. It's, you know, the active steps that you take to make sure that your work gets out there. So this would be your stakeholder engagement meetings, your workshops, your research events, that kind of thing. And they're very much sort of focused on that in recent years. This is quite a new but excellent development. But I think whether your funder encourages that or not, it's something that you should absolutely be building into your projects from the start.

00:17:01 Sohail Thanks, Harriet. That's really appreciated. So I am a qualitative health researcher using participatory methods, and as part of this, my identity is challenged. I learn a lot, and I undergo some sort of personal transformation. And I'd like to think that, at the end of a research, I turn out to be a slightly more decent human being. Is this the sort of impact that your work is concerned with?

00:17:34 Harriet I think that's a really good point, actually. We don't think enough often about the impact of the research that we do on researchers themselves. And I think, you know, especially for students, that's something that is very important to consider. You know, this is a learning experience for us. You learn so much from doing your first qualitative interview. I think, you know, any of your listeners who've already embarked on that will probably have had quite a memorable first experience of doing it. And then it obviously gets easier, but you really do learn from those conversations, you know, the mistakes that you make or the—you know, you learn so much more from the interviews that don't go well or—than the ones that do. So I think, in that sense, it can absolutely have an impact on you. But I think the other sort of angle on that is that it has an impact immediately on the people that you are interviewing as well, and that's quite an important message when you're thinking about impact, is that it isn't something that happens after the research has finished. It's something that happens during as well. So, you know, a good example of that, if you're thinking about, you know, introducing some kind of new safety check, for example, with one project into a hospital trust, you are interviewing members of the senior team at that trust about this: what their

feelings might be, about how it might be implemented. And those interviews aren't happening in a vacuum. Whilst you have those interviews, you're also educating the people that you're interviewing. They're necessarily learning more about the intervention and about the process, and they're also getting to know you as a representative of that research and that intervention. So that, in itself, is a kind of impact, and the terms we use for this are, you know, you have short and medium-term impacts as opposed to just sort of an ultimate long-term impact. So, certainly, you know, having had a conversation like that with someone in a position to make a difference, and, you know, they say, "This has actually changed my opinion on this. I think this is something that could potentially be useful." That's definitely a—you know, should be considered impact, and it's arisen from part of your research interview.

00:20:04 Sohail Thank you. So you've zoned in on another aspect of participatory research that I really value, and that's having a good process, a process that benefits your participants. So no matter what your findings, no matter what happens, at least there has been some positive impact on the people you are working with. How can you build that in to your research, whatever methods you're using?

00:20:32 Harriet So, first of all, you need to ask yourself whether that's appropriate because in some health research, for example, that may not be the case, and, you know, you don't necessarily want to be pushing your findings out there. And that's, you know, particularly true if you're looking at new medicines, for example, is an obvious case. But, overall, we should always be asking ourselves, you know, what we're doing and just be aware of the fact that we are both researcher and responsible for, you know, having an impact with our research. So bearing that in mind and making sure that we're considering our ethical principles when we go forward, I think, again, it comes back to making sure that you've got solid research relationships in place, that you present the research professionally but in a friendly and an accessible way, will definitely make people feel warmer towards it and you. And that, again, is a benefit of doing qualitative research, is that it encourages those kinds of relationships. And I think the other thing, as well, is you are not just there to get your interview and leave, and that's it. You know, ideally, your stakeholders will be involved at multiple points during your project. So, you know, even if you're only able to do one research interview with a participant, still following up with them, checking that their—you know, what their feelings are after the interview, letting them know how the research is going and letting them know the findings and potentially giving them an opportunity to comment on that as well or perhaps to attend a research launch event. But keeping them in touch and keeping that relationship friendly is a very good way of making it more likely that they'll look favourably on what you're doing.

00:22:27 Sohail I love that, kind of seeing how impact relates to ethics. So before on this podcast, we've talked about how it's important, from an ethical standpoint, to follow up with your participants to let them know what happened to the information they supplied and what changes it made. And you are saying that in order to have an impactful project, you have to do all these things as well. So impact and ethics are intimately linked. For the final question, I would like to ask you if there's anywhere for a researcher who's interested in impact to find out more. I know this is a bit of a tricky question because impact is tailored to the circumstances of each project, but is there anywhere that someone can go to sort of get a bit more of an idea of how to make impact with their research?

00:23:28 Harriet So what I would advise students to do, especially if you're working in health, is actually go and read impact case studies. So what—and then those can be accessed on the REF website, the Research Excellence Framework website, and they are fascinating to read. And what you can see there is there are so many different mechanisms to have impact, and they are quite specific to different projects, as you say. But reading Research Excellence Framework impact case studies does give you a good sense of the breadth and also the kinds of mechanisms that can work. And we published a paper a couple of years ago on, you know, specific mechanisms and pathways to impact in health work and specifically public health research. And, you know, we did find a lot of diversity there, but I think some of the things that they have in common is the capacity to do

that in the first place, the capacity to follow up, making sure that you focus on those relationships and that you have—you know, you develop meaningful, good working relationships and even friendships, in some cases. And that can really make a difference. And also just having the support of, you know, whoever it is, whether it's your supervisor or your department or your—you know, your university, making sure that you've got support to do impact work. And so, it's much less of an uphill struggle, I think, is very important. But, yes, especially for students, I would advise you to go and read them. They're very interesting, and they will give you a sense of really just feeling your own project and getting to know what will work in those particular quarters.

00:25:27 Sohail Brilliant. That's an excellent segue into our new impact blog, which we're launching via our website, where you can read about all manner of impact case studies. So thank you [downtempo electronic music fades in] so much, Dr Harriet Boulding, for giving us your time and your insights. It's really appreciated.

00:25:48 Harriet Well, thank you for having me. [music fades out]

[End of recording]