Qualitative Conundrums: Reflexivity with Michael Larkin

Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
- Michael Larkin (Speaker) (Michael)

[downtempo electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:13]

00:00:13 Sohail   Hi. I'm Sohail Jannesari, a migrant rights researcher and activist. I'm here to host the wonderful *Qualitative Open Mic* podcast series. This episode is part of our qualitative conundrum series, and qualitative research is something that 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 QUAHRC, which is also called the Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre, we aim to make space for these debates and tackle this really fundamental questions that plague qualitative researchers. So, today we're very lucky to have with us Michael Larkin. Michael, would you like to introduce yourself?

00:01:00 Michael   Yeah, thank you and thanks for having me. I'm a qualitative researcher. I'm based at Aston University in Birmingham. A lot of my work is in and around youth mental health and the relational context of youth mental health, so peer relationships, families, relationships with professionals. And most of it is phenomenological in focus. So I'm interested in understanding people's experiences of distress, of support they receive, of the relationships that give some context and meaning to understanding. All of that.

00:01:39 Sohail   Great. Thank you. And you are here to help us solve the conundrum of reflexivity and you're going to tell us all about it. [chuckles] So I'd be really grateful if you could start by letting us know, what does reflexivity mean? What is it in the first place?

00:01:56 Michael   I think it's more than one thing. I think it's helpful to notice that we attend to it and we bother with it because partly it's a problem. It's a problem because it's a way of signalling that researchers in the human and social sciences are part of the same system. They're the same kind of entity as the things that they're studying and that means it's not easy for them to step outside into some sort of objective space in relation to their objects of study. They bring stuff to their observations. Their observations have effects upon them. They're in a reflexive loop. And although we might theorise that that's true for all disciplines, it's probably less of a problem for botanists or geologists. So, you know, partly what it is, is a methodological problem, something that we have to think about because we are dealing with data which are messy and complex and real world, and we can't disentangle ourselves from that. So often when we talk about reflexivity in qualitative research, we're not so much talking about the problem as a set of practices or attempts to solve it. And so when we talk about reflexive practices, we're talking about all the different ways that people approach that problem. What they do to try and reveal or accommodate or engage with that messiness.

00:03:41 Sohail   Great, thank you. So you mentioned that perhaps there's not one meaning behind reflexivity. So could you go a bit into the different versions or perspectives of reflexivity?

00:03:56 Michael   So in terms of responses to the problem or this kind of ways that one might engage with reflexivity as a researcher, there's quite a long tradition of trying to carve it up into typologies. There are some great papers by Linda Finlay about different ways that we might think about how to be reflexive or different kinds of conceptualisations of when and where to be reflexive in the research process. And you sent me a more recent paper when we were chatting via email, which does a similar kind of thing. Often when people are dividing it up in that way they're—I suppose they're trying to make the task more manageable and they're trying to set out a menu of possibilities so that it's less overwhelming. And I think that's helpful. So, you know, one of the ways is to think about what you as an individual bring to the research. Another might be to think about how your connections with other people in the research have an impact upon it. A broader view or a more sophisticated view, if you like, might be to think about how to involve, at a sort of meta level. Those are the points of view in the development and presentation of the research. So a more kind of integrated or systemic kind of

reflexivity. Sometimes that has led people down a route to something that's quite radical. Quite deconstructed that has got multiple voices in it. That looks less like a typical piece of social science research and something that's hedging what it's saying. That is offering you different routes into the text and asking more of you as a reader. So it's like there's a spectrum of approaches. So sometimes that kind of individual approach is characterised as being almost like the simplest end, you know. That, you know, 'all you're doing is admitting to what you bring to the work'. But I think it… [sighs] Another way to think about differences here is to think about the different kinds of research that people do and the different kinds of relationships that they have to their data and the different kinds of teams that they work in. And so there's layers of complexity that go around that so that even an individual bit of reflexive work could be very sophisticated.

00:06:39 Sohail   Great. Thank you. I was curious. When you were talking I was thinking, well, reflexivity might be something that we also do in our everyday lives as part of trying to function in a society. I just wondered, what are the things that we might be able to draw on from our everyday lives to help us be more reflexive in research?

00:07:04 Michael   That's a really good question. So, you know, I guess we probably all have some experiences, some knowledge, some skills which are relevant to these practices. Whenever we notice that we are managing our identity or code switching or dealing with different sorts of social situations by bringing different aspects of our persona to the foreground or putting it in the background, we're doing a certain kind of positioning, aren't we? So I think all of that is familiar to most people. And that's particularly relevant when we notice how we manage our identities and their impact on the research during the data collection phase of work, where we're usually meeting with and connecting with other people and we're wanting to, usually as qualitative researchers, create a comfortable space for them. But we're aware that we bring certain kinds of identities, perhaps as an insider, perhaps as an outsider, certainly with some professional baggage. You know, if I say I'm a psychologist that sets up a set of expectations in people that another social scientist may not have to deal with, for example. So I think all of that's really interesting. I'm finding it a little harder to think of analogies that sort of we can draw on from everyday life that fit with the later stages of the research work. So the kind of stuff that we're engaged in when we're interpreting data and writing about data is striking me that that's quite a sort of skill specific sort of task. But I don't know. Perhaps you had something in—was there something that came to mind for you?

00:09:11 Sohail   It's a very good tactic to turn the question on the interviewer.

00:09:16 Michael   [laughs]

00:09:17 Sohail   Is there something that came to mind? I think sometimes when we are, maybe for instance, in a work situation and we might get an email which we are not happy with the tone of, or something like this, and perhaps we're in a way interpreting that email. And often, for instance, I would—I might be like, "Okay. Well, I have a very visceral negative reaction to this, but is that partly because of who I am? Is that because of my history of receiving, I don't know, journal article rejections or something like this?" [chuckles] So I feel like perhaps maybe that's an example of how in our work situation that we might interpret what someone said and use our identities to think about that.

00:10:15 Michael   Yeah, I think that's helpful. So I guess there are lots of situations in which we might be able to notice that the emotions that are evoked for us by a context or a situation or a relationship are in part unique to us because of what we've brought to that, and that might cause us to pause and reflect a little bit on how to respond. So, you know, we might not draw on our initial reaction because we know that that is probably not the right reaction for this situation as natural and comfortable as it feels. [laughs] Yeah, that's good. I like that. And I suppose the thing that I think often gets missed out of the cycle of this sort of talk, you know, we're talking our way through the research process and we're focused very much on what does the researcher bring, but what I like about your example is it's starting to get us thinking about, "What does the situation call forth

from the researcher?" And I think that's really important. And it often gets missed in these kind of typologies of reflexivity which tend to focus very much on, you know, how does the researcher affect the research? But I think it's really helpful and important to see it as a loop, so your example's really nice for that because it's making us notice that it's partly about how we react and how we respond. And that—you know, in a research context that might change what we do next or how we approach the next participant or how we theorise the next problem. So I think it's really good to be mindful of that stuff.

00:12:01 Sohail   Great, thank you. I'm glad I came up with a decent example. A lot of pressure there. [laughs]

00:12:06 Michael   Not as bad as me. [laughs]

00:12:09 Sohail   So we've talked a bit about reflexivity in terms of data collection, data interpretation, but is there a space and a place for it much earlier in the process?

00:12:20 Michael   Yeah. I mean, one of the things that I do with our health psychology trainees in the first week of the course is get them to think about what are the things that have led them here and what things might have led researchers to where they are. So that when they're reading published research, they've got some sense that these things didn't just appear out of nowhere, but actually they came about as a consequence of people's life histories, their interests, the opportunities that were afforded them by the structures that they were educated in, and then employed by the institutional priorities of their host organisations. The kinds of things that funders wanted to fund. The kinds of collaborators that were available to them and that wanted to work with them. All of that stuff is there before you've put pen to paper on an ethics application or a funding proposal. So I think it's complex because so much work is actually done in very large teams, so a lot of the methodological writing about reflexivity sometimes seems very out of step with that. But I think it's useful at least to notice what has got us here [chuckles] and what are our assumptions.

00:13:49 Sohail   That's really interesting. I think when you were talking about that difficulty of—we did this project in a team of ten people and I happen to be writing the bulk of it as an exploited postdoc, but it doesn't make sense for me to say, "Well, this is just my position. This is how it's affected the research." So I wonder, is there—have you seen any examples of reflexivity on the group level, especially something that might have been published? I've never come across it.

00:14:23 Michael   I haven't seen anything where I think, "Oh, that is a good model for what this could look like," and I think we are really missing that. I think what we tend to do, or what tends to happen at group level is, we tend to do a kind of—at best, a kind of notional check-in where everybody checks their baggage [chuckles] in the method section. You know, so there are three psychologists, two psychiatrists and a social worker. They've all got expectations about the importance of family relationships for youth mental health and they all believe that services could be better. You know, a sort of position statement that captures something of the team's orientation. But I don't think I've seen anything that is more rounded than that. There are some nice bits of dialogical work. So there are bits of reflexivity that are written with two people and... that can work really well. I think there's a couple of examples of it in the first wave of the reflexive turn. So I think there was a book edited by Steve Woolgar and I'm fairly sure there's one or two chapters in that book where they're written in a kind of dialogue. And one of them is Trevor Pinch in dialogue with another version of himself, actually. So it's kind of—it's him thinking about two different ways that he might orient towards the topic. And there's—not that long ago there was a special edition of the journal on qualitative psychology edited by Linda Finlay on reflexivity. And one of the papers in there had some dialogue between two co-authors, I seem to remember. So that can be done and that's sort of manageable within the format. But once you've got three, four, five voices, the risk is you've lost the reader, or you've created a kind of chaos. So you need a different way of characterising it. It's interesting to think what that might be like. I suppose you could characterise some different groupings within your team and the ways that they have played out and the different kinds of stake and interest that those

groupings reflect. And you can create space, I think, for those different voices to come through in relevant bits of the paper, couldn't you?

00:17:03 Sohail   That's a fascinating idea. So we have an ethics group at KCL that we try and look at how ethics can be improved and how the ethics process doesn't necessarily match up to participatory research or something like this. It's called Inspiring Ethics. And we recently submitted a paper where we talked about how our group worked with each other and we categorised ourselves—I guess it was a bit violent in that sense, but we put ourselves, coming from different positions, as the survivor researcher or as the stalwart researcher of a traditionalist. And it was really interesting because firstly people were like, "Well, actually I have multiple identities. I'm coming from multiple perspectives and this crude categorisation doesn't work." However, it did provide a nice narrative and a nice way of thinking about the multiple perspectives within our group. So I think there's definitely a lot of potential there. And I wondered, and this is I guess my question to you, how do we get from that group level to thinking about some of the history you mentioned and some of the institutional context and institutional identities that we make on—take on and how that might affect our research?

00:18:19 Michael   Yeah. It's difficult to know how much of that we can make visible in a paper, but I think it is quite helpful sometimes to understand where things began and what was possible. I mean, if I were giving a talk about a piece of empirical work at a conference today, I should probably say a little bit at the beginning about the context of our Phenomenology of Health and Relationships group at Aston in the same way as you've described your group. Because that's something that has been available to me and has been developing all the time I've been at Aston. The last—what is it now? Five, six years. And that's been a tremendous resource. So it's enabled a lot of learning around creative methods. A lot of risk taking around design. A lot of engaging with new ideas and sounding out for all of those of us involved in that group. And so that's an organisational resource that has shaped what I would feel confident doing and has made me a better researcher, I hope. And I guess the flip side of that is one could also reflect on the kinds of obstructions [chuckles] that there have been at any particular point. Or the kinds of opportunities that have been available to you that might not be available to someone else. So, you know, I think there's a range of stuff which make things possible, and they do shape your perspective, but it's quite difficult to pin down exactly what. Yeah, I think it's tricky.

00:20:23 Sohail   Absolutely. And I appreciated the thinking of, "Okay, well there's some spaces, for instance, a talk where I could perhaps go into that." The constraints of a paper are different, and I think that's something useful for our listeners and our students or whoever to think about the different types of reflexivity that can come out in different spaces. I kind of wanted to move us on a bit and just ask you a little bit about a problem that many qualitative researchers have when they start out and probably quite far into it. [chuckles] Where there's this reflexivity bit. We've been told to do reflexivity. It's a good thing. And sometimes it's done at the end of the project. Sometimes it's done in the write-up. Sometimes even if it is done, it's forgotten. How can we build in reflexivity so it's meaningful and influences and is part of the entire qualitative research project?

00:21:32 Michael   I think what's really tricky is how and where to make it visible. The practice of it in terms of creating spaces where we are able to reflect on these things and engage in dialogue around them is not that difficult if we've got like-minded co-researchers, peers, supervisors. We've got a place where we can talk about how things are going and how we're responding to the problems that research throws at us, we've got a place where we can do some reflexive work. I think what's really difficult is figuring out what an audience might need, and partly it helps to know who your audience are. [chuckles] And so, you know, I think you would probably solve the problem differently for different kinds of communication and outputs as you suggested. I was implying that in the answer to the last question. So there are journals which are extremely tight with their word limit, which are very topic focused, that are aiming to catch the attention of busy clinicians. People at the applied end. And there's relatively little space in those sorts of publications for this kind of extra detail. And in those sorts of journals, often what you are really fighting for is to create enough space for your participants' point of

view to cut through cleanly enough that it reaches the audience with some impact and some nuance. There are other places, conferences, blogs, research group meetings where we can be more dialogical, more reflective. And somewhere in the middle, I suppose, there are more qualitative friendly journals that have got longer word limits where there might be some expectation that you do display or perform some reflexive work in your write-up. And what that looks like, again, is probably going to depend a lot on who you think the audience for the writing are. You know, your readership want different things for different reasons. A methodological readership are probably quite happy to hear lots of reflections on process and decision making and the dynamics around that; how you resolve problems. Because that's helping them to think about how this methodology or this way of working that you're proposing or illuminating or expanding, how that might actually work in practice. So the reflections there are really helpful with that. But if you're writing about findings, then it might be that what the readership really wants is something a bit more back down the simple end of the reflexive spectrum. You know, a bit more understanding of, "Actually, what were your expectations and assumptions? How did you try to manage those?" You know, like in the Karen Dahlberg sense of bridling. You know, kind of not getting carried away by them, but recognising that you can't travel without them. And what effect do you think they did have and if any—and did they change? "You know, what have you learned?" I think all of that is useful to a reader, even if you're just giving glimpses of it. Because it's just putting some context around the claims that you're making that helps us to understand that you did see yourself in it. Or yourselves because you're probably a team and you have thoughts about your roles in it.

00:25:34 Sohail	Thanks for that. I wondered, in talking about and performing reflexivity is there perhaps a tension with this sort of desire to perform it and be academically rigorous and to have good quality work, but also perhaps revealing too much about yourself? Revealing very personal things? I shudder to think what people would think of me if they read my PhD reflexivity section. Good thing that people don't read PhDs.
00:26:10 Michael	[laughs] Yeah. I mean, a lot of the work that people do that's most honest and I guess exposing is in their PhD thesis, isn't it? That's the—because you know only two or three people are going to read that. And, yeah, I don't think there is a requirement to treat it as a confessional. I think there's a requirement to be open about what was difficult though, but I think you can write about that without necessarily revealing things that you'd rather not reveal. Yeah, it's tricky. And also I think it goes back to something you said earlier when you were talking about the way that you'd kind of tried to play this out in your group. And as soon as you allocate categories to your group members, everyone is uncomfortable with the category because of course identities and people are more complex and dynamic than that. So it's not that you are bringing a kind of essence of yourself forward when you're writing reflexively and saying, "This is authentically really what happened." It's more that you are noticing—you're trying to sort of notice the role that you had in the work and you're saying, "Well, this is the aspect of me that was really brought forward here and that—or this is the aspect of the research that really affected that dimension of me." And so, you know, it's not all of you. [chuckles] It's not your whole being, is it? [sighs] I don't know if this is helpful or not.
00:28:08 Sohail	No, I think that is helpful. I think it's interesting to see how we approach research and how and where we draw the boundaries, and I think reflexivity is part of that process. It's interesting to say it's not all of you. Sometimes I feel in the heat of a research project, "This is all of me."
00:28:31 Michael	Right.
00:28:31 Sohail	But I think it's just a useful reflection, I suppose, on who—
00:28:38 Michael	Yeah.
00:28:38 Sohail	—we are in a research context and maybe to have some more healthy balances in our working practices.

00:28:48 Michael	And in framing that question, you picked up on me using the word performance or—and you didn't look comfortable with that. So is that—is there some friction there between the idea of being authentically reflexive and something that feels more performative? Is that…?
00:29:10 Sohail	Yeah, that's an interesting question. I think I was uncomfortable with that. I think it's difficult because I am keen to, I guess, draw my boundaries and be clear about what identities and what parts of myself I'm bringing to or not.
00:29:29 Michael	Yeah.
00:29:30 Sohail	And I know that equally, how genuine is reflexivity all the time? Because sometimes if we are really, really reflexive, we might not do the research or we might—I don't know. If you follow it through, there are some quite drastic consequences that could come from a real deep dive introspection. And often—so I'm coming from a lot of post-colonial perspectives and if you really follow the reflexivity through the post-colonial setting lens, there are some things that you might not be comfortable with at the end of it.
00:30:16 Michael	Yeah. And so, you know, I think that is probably highlighting something about the need to be—I guess it's a degree of pragmatism, isn't it? The need to be pragmatic about how much of yourself you put into the work. It is work and, you know, we are doing it because we get paid for it. [chuckles] And that means that the output is perceived to have some value and the process is perceived to have some value. And—but like all kinds of work, it doesn't own us and we don't have to love all the parts of it. [chuckles] You know, we have to—often have to tolerate some discomfort around certain aspects of it. And it's probably good to notice those points of discomfort, but it might not always be so helpful for us to bring them to the foreground all the time because we want to get paid at the end of the month and we want to finish the task. It's pretty tricky.
00:31:32 Sohail	Yeah. I think it's also good life advice sometimes as well. Perhaps something that I often struggle with. I think we're coming towards the end of our time. It's been really interesting areas we've gone into. I just wanted to ask a quick question about, if someone is interested in learning more about reflexivity—I know you've mentioned some resources so far, but are there any key sort of texts or podcasts or whatever that you think would be really good to listen to or read?
00:32:08 Michael	Yeah, I'll have to go with read. So there's—I mean, if you Google Linda Finlay's work, there's just a string of great papers by Linda… and so that's a really good place to start. She is, I think, probably the best person to start with because she's really good at conceptualising what she thinks reflexivity is and the different ways we can do it, but also, she's really good at doing it. So there are lots of examples of writing where she's actually showing you how and where she's thinking about her relationship with her participants, or her preconceptions about the topic, or the impact that the affective weight of the work is having on her. And so I think, you know, that would be my—the first thing that comes to mind, really, in terms of a recommendation. Yeah.
00:33:07 Sohail	Brilliant. Thank you so much and thank you so much for all your thoughts and for coming on the podcast and just giving us your time. It's really, really appreciated.
00:33:17 Michael	No, thanks for having me.
00:33:19 Sohail	And for the listeners out there, [downtempo electronic music fades in] we are continuing with the Qualitative Conundrum series. We've got the last episode, it is the next one, and that will be with Oli Williams. So please tune in for that. And thanks again, Michael. [music fades out]

[End of recording]