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Anti-racist Qualitative Health Research: Theory with Bee Damara

Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
- Bee Damara (Speaker) (Bee)

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[downtempo electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:11]

- 00:00:11 Sohail Welcome to the Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre's new series on anti-racist qualitative research. In this series you'll join me, Sohail Jannesari, to look at whether, how, and to what extent qualitative research can contribute towards anti-racism and decolonisation. Today, we're starting at the beginning of things talking about how theory—how post-colonial critical race theory can help us interpret qualitative data and shape our qualitative health projects to anti-racist aims. We've got with us an incredible guest today. Would you like to introduce yourself?
- 00:00:51 Bee Hi. My name's Bee Damara. I'm a researcher at King's College London on The Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set.
- 00:01:00 Sohail We are working on The Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set project. Can you tell us a bit about what that is and what a core outcome set means?
- 00:01:11 Bee So The Modern Slavery Core Outcome set is about speaking to survivors of human trafficking and people who work in the anti-trafficking field about what their desired outcomes are after exiting human trafficking.
- 00:01:26 Sohail Amazing. Thanks, Bee. And what's your role in the project?
- 00:01:31 Bee I'm a researcher with lived experience so part of that is giving consultancy to academic researchers. I've also interviewed trafficking survivors. I've done data analysis and transcription and I've been facilitating a research advisory board.
- 00:01:53 Sohail Cool. Thank you. And I know you are also applying for a PhD looking at survivor activist perspectives on the relationship between human trafficking and colonialism in South Africa. So to get stuck into the theory, it'd be great to know a bit about, with this idea of yours, what sort of post-colonial theorists you're using and why use theorists in the first place?
- 00:02:21 Bee Okay. So I will talk about some of the different perspectives on human trafficking or modern slavery depending on what your position is. It can vary from what you call it. So on the one hand you have Kevin Bales and the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham who they—Kevin Bales is one of the primary modern slavery theorists who's really kind of brought out into the open the issue of human trafficking and modern slavery. And his perspective is that, modern slavery is a continuation of transatlantic slavery. The main difference being that it's not focused on race, so people are exploited based on economic circumstances rather than because of the colour of their skin. And then on kind of the other side of things, you have Laura Brace and Julia O'Connell Davidson who have a bit of more of a critical perspective on human trafficking, which is that it's actually very different to the transatlantic slave trade. One of the examples that's used is that, people who are trafficked today oftentimes they want to move. That might not be the case for everyone and I always say—I think it's better not to kind of make a statement that's like a sweeping statement that applies to all survivor because everyone's case is different. But they argue that people want to move and in the past people subjected to slavery and the transatlantic slave trade didn't want to move. There's also many other differences, like it would be lifelong, generational. And that sometimes—again sometimes the case with modern slavery but usually not—often it's a set period. Like say if you're in debt bondage you stay in this situation until they say that the money is paid off and then you might be allowed to leave. There's many differences that have been pointed out between the two. And the other kind of point of disagreement is that whether it's based on race or not, and Julia O'Connell Davidson and Laura Brace both look into the colonial aspect of human trafficking. So the way it's described by Julia O'Connell Davidson is that actually global inequalities that we see as a result of colonialism are where that afterlife of slavery lies, and people who are trafficked, they actually have more in common with people who were exploited when they were trying to flee slavery than people in slavery themselves.

So to Julia O'Connell Davidson like the real afterlife of slavery is in the kind of trapped impoverished conditions that people live in, in the Global South and then the kind of legal controls on their movement. Because that obviously was a major issue in transatlantic slavery as well. People needed documents to move around, the movement was completely controlled. And you see that in—I mean there's a researcher called Sharma and she describes it as a global apartheid, and as a South African whose experienced apartheid conditions that's something I can agree with. Like there's a different—definite kind of segregation of people and poverty between the Global North and the Global South. And to Julia O'Connell Davidson and Laura Brace that's where the issue truly lies, whereas when the Rights Lab and Kevin Bales a lot of their focus tends to be more individualistic. So criminalising traffickers, rescuing victims, and the implications of that is that the government ends up kind of using the research as an excuse to put on more migration controls. So you often see in the media, "Oh, we need to stop these. We need France's cooperation to stop boats coming across to stop these evil traffickers from exploiting people." And then you see that getting used as an excuse to stop letting people into the country, when really that's kind of exacerbating the problem because you're creating more of a boundary. It's kind of solidifying this divide between the north and the south. And really a solution would—a better solution would be to—instead of focusing on individual crimes and individual cases to, even out the situation globally. Reparations for example, you know, would go a long way towards really fixing the problem. I mean, another way you can look at it is, Laura Brace and Julia O'Connell Davidson they kind of argue that there's—it's not a very clear boundary about what can be defined as trafficking. So for example, like legal migrants—so-called legal migrants, sometimes they come into the country and they can be on, like, an employment visa, say domestic workers for example, and they're kind of bound to their employer in that way. And a lot of the same conditions apply but it's not classed as modern slavery or trafficking even though a lot of the same conditions can apply. And you could say the same with sex work as well. Because if you're being forced into sex work by a person, they class that as human trafficking. If you are being forced into sex work because of your life situation, like not being able to eat or because you have a drug addiction for example, that's not classed as human trafficking. Whereas the only difference, really, is the source of what's forcing someone is different. So it is this kind of arguments about where the boundaries lie and if it can even be defined at all. And me personally, I'm kind of between the two extremes of the debate. Closer to the Laura Brace side and Julia O'Connell Davidson side because I do think that it's a structural issue more than an individual issue.

00:08:57 Sohail Brilliant. Thank you so much. That was a beautiful summary of the two sort of theoretical positions that may be in tension with each other. So you've told me that you are doing an insider or you're hoping to do an insider ethnography with photovoice. I kind of wanted to see—so you've just said, you know, you're probably more towards the Laura Brace, Julia O'Connell section of spectrum of—section of the spectrum, I suppose? So what is it—how's that going to affect your insider ethnography? You know, if you have this theory in mind, how's that going to make the ethnography and the photovoice different to—if you didn't.

00:09:36 Bee I suppose it's going to change what I focus on. So the reason I've chosen to do photovoice is because I want to capture conditions that people are living in. And what kind of interested me in doing the project in South Africa, as well as being from there myself and also because of the apartheid situation, I have an interest in that. But it's also working with people there who have said things like they find it difficult to stay safe because they have needs to—for survival. And so it's a limited kind of options that people have, is between not being able to eat and afford to survive or going into a situation that might be exploitative. So I guess that's going to—I'm interested in sort of capturing the context of that and people's reasons for entering situations where they might be exploited.

00:10:36 Sohail Great. Thanks. And you think that perhaps for Laura Brace and Julia O'Connell's more structural theory will help you get at those reasons better perhaps than the Kevin Bale school of thought?

- 00:10:49 Bee Yeah. Because it kind of more explains—tries to explain the underlying ‘why is this happening?’. I guess that’s what I’m more interested in, and I think, really, to find any solutions to it you have to look at the why. You can’t really respond without looking at the reasons why it’s happening in the first place.
- 00:11:09 Sohail Thanks Bee. One question that kind of came to mind when you were talking about Kevin Bales’s theory. So it still is around a continuation of a transatlantic slave trade, you know, conceiving modern slavery as that but focusing on economics, not race. I’m just a bit confused as how you could say that it’s a continuation of a transatlantic slave trade but not focus on race. How does that work? Just....
- 00:11:37 Bee I guess what you’re saying is they’re the same kind of tactics used, but different people targeted. But to me I think there’s a lot that goes against that. Like for example you can’t really look at economic situations without looking at race because the whole reason for economic disparity between different countries, a lot of it is coming down to colonialism. So how can you possibly separate the two? And even when you look at domestic trafficking in places like the US, there’s a huge overrepresentation of people of colour who are being trafficked domestically, why is that? And if it’s not to do with race, then why? And interestingly in the UK, they don’t appear to record—at least in the NRM statistics, they don’t appear to be recording people’s race. They’re recording country of origin. So you’ll see they’ll record that people are British but there isn’t a breakdown of their ethnicity. I’m sure they do have those figures—I’d hope they do have those figures—I haven’t seen them. That would be interesting to know as well.
- 00:12:53 Sohail Thank you. So there’s kind of a—you know—looking at modern slavery you’re saying needs—at least in part some sort of anti-racist lens to understand it fully because of who it—not solely but majority primarily affects.
- 00:13:12 Bee Yeah, definitely. And as I said before—like you can’t really make a sweeping statement about everyone who’s been through trafficking. There’s lots of white British people who’ve been through trafficking who have—you know been targeted for different reasons so this isn’t going to apply to everyone. And I’m always wary of—you know—because I think that there’s a lot of that on both sides of the argument. “This is how it is for trafficked people.” “No, this is how it is for trafficked people.” But actually, it’s different for a lot of—you know depending on case by case but certainly there’s a lot of bigger effects on people of colour and that needs to be considered and looked into. Also, it’s interesting when you think about definitions, when you’re talking about the use of force and coercion, the Palermo Protocol which is the kind of standard UN definition of human trafficking coercion into exploitative labour. Like how different is it, as I’ve said before, being exploited by a person or being exploited by a situation or being coerced by a situation. Like when you think about a lot of people living in the Global South, if you are being forced because of your situation to work in a gold mine where you’re getting paid very little. But you have to do it because you need to send your kids to school or send yourself to school if you’re a child yourself, who’s the trafficker there? Is it the individual who owns the gold mine or is it a state? Is it multiple states who are kind of funding this and causing these conditions to begin with. I find that like quite an interesting debate as well.
- 00:14:58 Sohail Yeah, that’s fascinating. I think we often work and focus on—as you said in the media it’s the criminal gangs and it’s the trafficker. And that definitely feels like it takes away from the sort of roots of a problem as you said. It individualises things rather than looking at systems and—such a good point. I wondered if you could tell us then a bit about how much did race come up in the Modern Core Out—Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set project? So we’ve established it’s important and there are theories which can help bring that out, but I just wanted to get your sense of how much you thought it came up or not in the Core Outcome Set project.
- 00:15:43 Bee I think it came up a lot. I think it’s something we could have explored more in our research. But even without kind of specifically trying to explore it, it’s something that definitely came up. Like one of the outcomes that was voted on was ‘no racism’. We’d actually had interesting discussions about that because we’d started off with the

phrase 'less racism' because we thought—well that's more realistic, you know, we can't stop racism entirely. And—but participants especially survivors were very keen that we used the term 'no racism'. And part of that discussion people talked about the different ways people are treated in the asylum process based on where they came from and what their skin colour was. Different ways people were treated in safe houses because of this as well, and different experiences for people in the UK based on skin colour as well. So it was very relevant to people's experience even if it's something that we perhaps didn't explore enough of in the research itself.

- 00:16:48 Sohail Thanks Bee. So that's really interesting. Do you think there's something which could have been done better than in that context? Like would it have been useful, for instance to use a theoretical lens to really bring that out? What could have helped that project address racism better?
- 00:17:10 Bee It's difficult to say. I think perhaps in the interviews we could have asked more about it to draw it out a bit more. And again—perhaps in the surveys we could have included it somehow. And again—like in the analysis as well which is still ongoing, it's something that can be drawn out there as well. But really I think it needs more work from other projects to kind of solely focus on it as well. The core outcomes that—it had a specific focus of working out outcomes for all survivors which should include race. But it would be good to see more research into people's experiences of—survivors of human trafficking experiences of racial discrimination in the UK.
- 00:17:58 Sohail Great. Thank you. So perhaps maybe then a sort of critical race lens or a post-colonial lens, you know, using those theories in the context of this project might not have worked. Are you saying—and maybe it would've been—it's more suited to other projects really focusing on racism?
- 00:18:18 Bee Yeah, I believe so. I think it's something that should definitely be included in The Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set projects and perhaps could be included a bit more. But more so I think it needs further research with a sole focus on it.
- 00:18:34 Sohail That's very helpful. So I know that you were also writing a paper on survivor involvement in the Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set project. And in that paper, you are using theory which gets at power dynamics which I think is actually quite a nice way of—you know you can—in theory look at issues of race through racism through those lenses, but it's also perhaps a little broader. So could you tell us a bit about the theories you are using to explore power dynamics in survivor involvement in the project?
- 00:19:13 Bee So something I'm really interested in coming on board as a survivor myself is kind of the difference of experience between being a survivor and being a kind of more traditional academic researcher, is that there is that—even though the research team has been very keen to include survivors on an equal level, there's still this underlying—I guess feelings of inferiority for survivors. And that's not something that's come from the research team necessarily it's something that's kind of ingrained through—you know for survivors through years and years of oppression and you can see that kind of structurally in the education system as well that. Inequalities when it comes to race and other oppressions there's like less access for certain people and more access for others. And it's—you can kind of see those dynamics coming into play within the research team, even though we try to kind of confront them and talk about them, and balance things a little bit as participatory research aims to do. In practice it's very difficult to do because you're working against centuries of oppression that's kind of really deeply ingrained. So I suppose that's been the main focus of the—what I've been drawing out of the paper really, especially as well like, the kind of deep de-politicisation of survivors and people of colour. Because what you find is survivors particularly are kind of given citizenship on the basis of victimhood. And that's often—you kind of have to play along with the victimhood thing, "Like I'm here because I'm a victim. Please let me in because I'm a victim." And as a result of that—and this is something [inaudible 00:21:06] talks about as well, the kind of agential aspects of self, get kind of squashed. And I think that's the case for people of colour too and when you have both, like your trafficking survivor and your person of colour, like that's kind of compounded. I mean—as we all

know it's not been so long that people of colour have been allowed to even vote. So if you're kind of thinking I don't have agency, I don't have a political voice because of my skin colour and also I'm a victim of trafficking, it kind of compounds them. So I think that that's related to the project because what we found in the project was people really wanted to use their political voice. We had people who'd been doing campaigning, lobbying on all different kinds of issues and that really came into the conversation, like whether we kind of asked about it or not. That was always something that came in. And Minh Dang from Survivor Alliance—so she actually wrote a chapter in a book about survivors leaving a legacy, which I think is a reason why a lot of survivors are interested in political action as well. It's kind of leaving something of yourself that's more than, "I'm just a victim." Leaving something different behind and something more constructive. That book is edited by Chisolm-Straker and Chan, the one with Minh Dang's chapter.

- 00:22:34 Sohail Brilliant. Thank you. Okay, so I guess that you're using some theories and ideas around power dynamics around de-politicisation and agency to reflect on how the project went and to—I guess bring out some of the things which are more unsaid or hope to bring the history in as well I guess. Would that be fair or?
- 00:22:59 Bee Yeah, I believe so. Because I think it's important and I think it's something that should be considered more whether or not you kind of agree with Laura Brace's and Julia O'Connell Davidson's kind of side of the argument. It still needs to be considered in some way.
- 00:23:18 Sohail So what message would you have? This is maybe a bit of a cheeky question but I'm curious, what message would you have for—you know, you're saying that the Rights Lab, which as far as I understand is probably the centre of a lot of human trafficking, on the slavery research in the UK, got a lot of money from a government grant. You know, what message would you have for an organisation like that mate? Is there space for differing perspectives to bring out issues around structural racism? What—you know, or does it just have to be done somewhere else?
- 00:23:51 Bee I think both sides could collaborate a bit more but that's difficult because they have very different positions. But I mean to be fair to the Rights Lab, they do do research on people's conditions prior to trafficking and ways that people's kind of financial conditions can be improved in places where—that are high risk for human trafficking. But I definitely think there's—in my view not enough kind of structural analysis and we need more people saying the kind of—the cause of human trafficking is not these like evil horrible individuals, although there are evil horrible individuals involved. The cause of it is structural and that's something we really need to tackle to really confront the issue.
- 00:24:37 Sohail Thanks. That kind of makes me think of a related question around the term modern slavery. And if you want to view it as a structural issue should you frame the—you know, when you do research and you're working with survivors, should you work with a broader set of people, a broader range of people, so you know—people—you know who might not necessarily identify as survivors, but might have been through difficult and exploitative migration experiences. Is there something about—you know there's too much of a—modern slavery is a way of categorising and perhaps artificially sealing off people? I don't know. What do you think?
- 00:25:19 Bee Yeah. I definitely agree. I think to kind of really find out about where the boundaries lie. If they—I mean there's the idea of it being a spectrum as well, which is interesting, but definitely legally and in sort of immigration law and things they set clear boundaries that aren't really there. So it would be interesting to speak to people who might not traditionally be considered modern slavery survivors but have very similar, almost identical positions. I mean, even if you think about the definition and this is something Laura Brace talks about as well, it can be applied to wives in a lot of situations as well who are kind of forced to stay in a marriage and then forced to take on unpaid labour as part of the marriage and maybe through violence and coercion. Like you could argue

that there's little difference between that, so it could be a much more expanded definition that's definitely worth kind of investigating.

- 00:26:18 Sohail Thank you. And I guess with that more structural framing with that sort of expanded definition, you will come to different solutions I suppose. That's kind of what you were saying—I think earlier in the podcast where you were talking about the two different theoretical perspectives and they seem to lead to two different sort of conclusions on what needs to be done. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?
- 00:26:46 Bee Yeah. So Kevin Bales's Rights Lab said—is a lot of that tends to be focused on rescuing individuals. So some of it is preventative in the terms of like setting up more ethical businesses and encouraging fair trade practices and kind of legal justice solutions like arresting traffickers, combating these trafficking gangs. But there isn't so much recommendation from that side about how we balance things and maybe because it's a huge, huge task, you know, it's not something they can easily be called for. It's that we balance the balance global inequality, like that's not straightforward. It's huge you know, and it's true that in the meantime, like smaller things need to be done to help individual people. But at the same time, I don't think you can do that without looking at the bigger picture, which is what Laura Brace and Julia O'Connell Davidson are arguing is that you need to—the real kind of afterlife of slavery is the in this global inequality and that's what we need to be focusing on.
- 00:27:56 Sohail Great. Thank you so much. So just coming towards the end of our podcast, I'd like to ask a bit about if there's a listener out there who's thinking, "Okay, I am wanting to include sort of a more theoretical perspective in my work." Where could they go to read about some of these theories that you've talked about and also—you know, do you have any top tips for including theory in your work?
- 00:28:24 Bee Definitely looking into kind of all sides of the argument, looking into critical perspectives as well and trying to—I mean it's hard to read as a survivor myself as well, trying to be, like, not so defensive about it is quite hard. Like, especially when—yeah, it's complicated. But definitely trying to, like, let your guard down a little and take in more critical perspectives. There's a few books I'd recommend, Julia O'Connell Davidson's. If you want a short read, there's a book by Julia O'Connell Davidson that's just come out which is called *What Do We Know About Slavery?* that kind of gives a really useful overview in a small book. And another one that's written by Julia O'Connell Davidson and Laura Brace, it's edited by them and it's a collection of works by different authors. I actually can't remember what it's called.
- 00:29:18 Sohail We'll get it in the—if the listeners look on the webpage, we'll have a resource there.
- 00:29:24 Bee Okay, awesome.
- 00:29:25 Sohail I think where you started was quite nice. It is really good to think about critical perspectives and try and let your guard down a bit. I feel like I often go into research with—you know, especially like I do a lot of migration work and my initial perspective is that sort of Home Office, obviously evil, and the government is evil. Not that this necessarily changes much, but I think that having a critical perspective at least gives you a more nuanced way of interpreting theory and interpreting your findings so I think it is a good place to start. At least you'll know the criticisms of the other side and then you can weave that into your interpretation so you have an even stronger argument. All right. Okay, final question. If you want to find out more about Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set project and that work, where can we go?
- 00:30:15 Bee So you can go to mscos.co.uk. We're also on Twitter on @mslaverycos and you can find information about the work we're doing on there.
- 00:30:29 Sohail Brilliant. Thank you so much. So thanks so much Bee and thank you listeners. Next episode, we will be continuing this series. So today we looked at a lot of the theoretical framing around anti-racist qualitative research, and next episode we'll be talking

hopefully to Wayne Farah about how we frame research questions in an anti-racist way. So please do join us for that. Thank you and goodnight.

[End of recording]