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# Ethics in Qualitative Research: Latefa Guemar on the skills and values of an ethical researcher

## Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
- Latefa Narriman Guemar (Speaker) (Latefa)

[Start of recording]

[downtempo electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:05]

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| 00:00:05 Sohail | Hello, lovely listeners. Just a quick note before you begin this podcast episode. The sound quality isn't quite up to our standards. I hope you'll bear with us and we'll be back on track for the subsequent episodes. Thank you very much, and enjoy. Hi, I'm Sohail Jannesari, a migration and mental health researcher. I'm very excited to introduce you to the *Qualitative Open Mic* podcast, hosted by myself and the Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre. This series is on ethical practices in qualitative health research, particularly with marginalised groups. In each episode we'll ask, "What are the best and most positive ethical practices that you can think of and that we can learn from?" This episode, we are very lucky to have with us Latefa. We are going to talk about how to become an ethical researcher: the skills, the morals and the relationships you need to do more ethical research. So, Latefa, would you like to introduce yourself? |
| 00:01:12 Latefa | Yes. Thank you, Sohail. So I'm very pleased to be with you today and to speak about something that I really love speaking about. So, my name is Latefa Narriman Guemar. I am an activist and a researcher, and my focus is on forced migration, gender and migration in general. Yeah. So at the moment I work—I am conducting a research for Coventry University on how youth in Algeria look at their future and how they can create sustainable development in Algeria. But I'm also working as an integration officer with resettled refugees in the borough of Lewisham. Ethics is part of my life. It has to be part of my life in everyday work. More as an integration officer than as a researcher I have to be honest, because integration means giving them the information on where to get English classes, where to get housing advice, where to get immigration advice, but also it's also about creating that trust for them to explain their pain. And what I found in my work is that talking about their mental health is strongly related with the trust they have in you, and building that trust has a particular consideration. |
| 00:02:48 Sohail | Thank you, Latefa. Sorry, Latefa, I just wanted to pick up on some of what you said and maybe go into a bit more detail. So you kind of mentioned that ethics was about having morals. Being an ethical health researcher is about morality. So could you explain a bit more about that? |
| 00:03:05 Latefa | Morality, what I will say is about the code to respect when you are looking at people's behaviour. As a researcher, we have that responsibility to make ourselves aware of the minimum moral standard required. The code of ethics and the moral values which are taken to lie behind it, define what the profession is all about, which is the—whether the integration officer supporting or academic or researcher. If you look at how our life is regulated, how our behaviours are socially constricted, we can look at a way for us getting the knowledge. As the social researchers, we need to be fully aware not to be harming the public good, not to be harming the people we are working with and not to be harming ourselves. Our profession. |
| 00:04:06 Sohail | Yeah. Well, I was just kind of curious to see, okay, you know, do you know harm is a key sort of ethical principle that researchers are told to adhere to? But what are the virtues and values that researchers have to develop and embody to achieve that? So, you know, things like, is it something about empathy or fairness or forgiveness or generosity or gratitude or humility? What are the character qualities that people need? |
| 00:04:35 Latefa | Yes, definitely. If you are researching vulnerable people or marginalised people, the first character you need to have is empathy. Because when you have empathy, you are definitely not going to harm the person. You need to have an extremely important and deep listening skills. You don't speak, you just listen. Because the more you listen, the more that person feels that you are really listening, the more they will tell you. You're not doing it because you're going to be called a doctor and be a PhD. If they feel that—if he or she feels that he's telling you all the pain he is in for you to write a research |

proposal or to write a research paper only, then you will lose their trust. So empathy and listening skills are two very good skills you need to have. The other one is how to engage. They need to have that. They need to work on themselves and reflect on their own way of stigmatising, whether it is gender or religion or, as I said, because the person you are researching will feel that.

00:05:52 Sohail Thank you. That's really interesting. So I think a lot of what you're talking about sounded like relationships with a participants were at the heart of ethics. So could you tell me a bit more about how you have developed relationships with your participants in your work and how that has supported, hopefully, your research ethics?

00:06:12 Latefa Yes. I was researching highly skilled Algerian women who fled during that conflict of the 90s. In Algeria, in that part, that side of my research, the Algerian government and the president was trying to make people sign-in for what they called Amnesty Law; forgiving and forgetting all what happened. In the other side, what we call now the diaspora side, I mean, the people who were outside Algeria, that was not accepted Because most of the women I've researched wanted the truth. "What happened? We can't just forgive without the truth." I mean, it's a long process. However, because there was this reticence of not accepting this Amnesty Law, a law was made in Algeria for anyone to write or to research the 90s would be fined a good amount and prison. So this made people reticent at first to speak about it. Some people didn't want to be not allowed to go to Algeria or—so I—how do you explain that? My research, first it would be strongly anonymous. I will change names. I will change cities. I will never give the name of the city or I'll never give the name of—however, because I was—my—I was targeting—the target was highly skilled and highly professional women, some of the stories, even if you change the name, even if you change the places, the woman will be recognised. So I said, "Let's change this and make it quantitative and use the methodology to just actually identify where are these women, where they have fled from Algeria, which country, which…" So I've done the survey and I used the method to actually identify them. And then on the survey, at the end of my survey I said, "This is my email address. If you want to tell me more about your experience, please contact me." I was not expecting anyone to contact me and I was with no qualitative data for about eight months or ten months. And then I started receiving emails so then I set up the interviews. Most of them happened on Zoom. Sorry, there was no Zoom at the time. It was Skype. The issue I met, I mean, the obstacles, where at first I was doing this research in the UK and, I mean, the women were not, like, quite open to this. I had to explain why and—I was part of them, but why I was doing this. So I was explaining that, "We need to share our experience. Why we did not have international protection? Why the asylum process failed on gender-based violence?" And then women were very sensitive to this, but not talking too much about the experience of—in Algeria. And then there was another one who I've only met on Facebook. So I emailed her and I told her I wanted to know more about Algeria. And there was all that. So after six meetings with this woman she was, "Yeah, yeah, I would love to. Yeah, I will call you when I'm ready." It took about six months and then one day randomly she called me. And this woman, this particular woman, became the core case study of my PhD, because it turned from an interview from just like all what we do, like in-depth, non-structured interview. So I went with a few questions and she told me everything. It was hard for her to just stop that interview. My conclusion is that you definitely need to take in consideration a lot of factors: Where we are? Who's funding you? Which university you are doing your PhD or which place? Why you are in in the UK where very few women went to? I had to take all this in consideration before I—and I'm very proud of myself that I have interviewed fifteen women And a hundred and eighty women responded to my survey, which was kind of good questions and good, like, in-depth questions for the survey. A different experience with one woman I got in touch with, I make an appointment with and I took my ticket. And so I called her when I arrived and said, "Yeah, I'm still waiting for you tomorrow at 10 o'clock." And she was speaking to me and she started telling me all of her experience, and I was saying "Okay, excuse me madam, but we need to sign the consent form so I can use this interview," and she did not sign. So I told—when she was telling me the story I was not recording because I didn't have the consent form. So she kept me about six hours while I only had like four days to spend in Paris. At the end, she did not sign the consent form. But two weeks

later, she started sending me emails with all, like, why she—what happened to her in Algeria. In fact, she started telling me all her story from 1962. And then with my supervisor, we decided to use some of those emails and some of what she was telling me, because sending an email was a kind of consent. And maybe during those two weeks, she was just trying to research who I was, but the trust came. And then she even sent me some chocolates from France later on. I went back to speak to her, turning my PhD into a book, but then she died recently. There is this ethic of—because they—some people may say, "Oh, no, I did not say that," after when you've published. And those two women are not there—are not here anymore and I will try my best to respect all what they have told me, to respect their memory. If I'm asked questions about the specific experiences, I will do my best to be as accurate and as—so this is what ethics is for me. Ethics is really about your—how you—the respect you pay to the people you are researching, and also to respect their memory.

00:13:09 Sohail — Thanks, Latefa. That's very much appreciated. So something that really—several things came out from what you said. I found it really interesting that you used a quantitative survey as a basis to sort of introduce yourself and create relationships to lay the groundwork for qualitative research. So I found that really fascinating and something that I would probably not have thought of. But I also felt that you obviously put a lot of time and effort into getting to know the women you interviewed. You said you had six meetings with one of the interviewees before and you talked to them about their experiences. So how does that work in—I'm a researcher and the projects I do, you know, they have lots of deadlines attached to them and limited resources. I'm thinking, do you feel like there's a structural barrier to creating relationships with the people you're working with as participants in research?

00:14:04 Latefa — So my—in—I started my PhD in Swansea University, and it was really mainly how to engage highly qualified Algerian women, blah, blah, into a project with Algeria. So this is why we said, "Okay. We don't know where they are. Do they exist? So let's do a method to—at least to gather to know how many, where are they?" So I started using an RDS, which is random sampling. It's quite a specific method. So the idea was to have six seeds, six women who are highly qualified, left in the 90s, and have some connection with others. So I will—I sent the survey to the six seeds I have identified on Facebook, because I used Facebook mainly at the beginning, and then they had to send that survey to at least three of their peers. And the conditions were having fled Algeria during the 90s, been highly qualified, and the third one was still being linked to Algeria somehow. And then the six recruited three, and then the other three recruited another three, and so this is how we reach a hundred and eighty. This worked well for the first two months and then it was linked with anything that happened in Algeria. It would stop. People would start thinking, "Oh, who is this researcher sending this survey? It does look like a spy. It does…" Because it was at the same time in Algeria people try [inaudible 00:15:48]. The government was trying to organise a referendum for this and they said no. And so it was always—my research was always linked to what is going on in Algeria. What happened to—it will stop and then I will go four months without having any response. And then I went back to my supervisor saying, "I think I need to abandon this because it's not going to work." And then she would say, "No, no, no, no, just leave it and see." Because this method was only used to—it was used by an American researcher who was looking at how HIV spreads within campuses—university campuses. So it was very new and so my supervisor was really keen on seeing how it works. And I even went to Oxford and Professor Cohen, who is the father of diaspora studies, told me, "Oh yeah, just keep going. Keep going, don't worry it'll work. And we are also in Oxford trying to use this method, a quantitative method that gives you at least information on how this group works and connect with each other. At least you will have—even if you don't have qualitative, at least you will have the way of having to know they exist and they connect with each other and how and why." And then in the middle of this, my supervisor left Swansea University and I was—it was already very hard, but then when my supervisor left I was like, "I'm not doing it." So, and then I moved myself to London. I started volunteering with refugees and asylum seekers in a good place here in London. I said, "I'm not—I don't need to be an academic to help my community. Let's just abandon this." And volunteering with me was Professor Phil Marfleet, to whom I say hi if he listens to this. He was volunteering with us as well, and

he was the director of the Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging at UEL. And then just talking, I told him my story and he came to me and he said, “What is the topic?” And I told him my topic and then he said, “Oh! Nobody actually has written about Algerian women. Send me something. Send me a chapter or send me something you wrote.” I emailed him something I wrote, a chapter, and he came back to me and he said, “We are—I’m going to contact UEL. We are going to transfer you there and you will finish your PhD there.” And when I started—when I went back to UEL and met the supervisor and started talking about what I was doing, she said, “You have enough to just write up. Your fieldwork is completed.” I started writing, and then at the end of that year—in UEL it was different from Swansea. Every year you go and you present your research to pass. And this is where we’re stuck because the ethical form I’ve signed in Swansea was different from what they were expecting in UEL. So for one of the interviews, and one of the way I conducted that email address —that email – even asked me to go back to the ethical committee and pass it. I found then that whether it is two different universities or two different ways of looking at ethics, but in term of researching the refugees and migrants and women—and I mean, the ethical form I filled for UEL was very difficult. It was very hard and very culture sensitive and a lot of respect and values, for my research anyway.

00:19:48 Sohail — Well, I wanted to pick up about your experiences working in the charity sector. So you mentioned that you ended up volunteering and working in the charity sector, and that sort of interestingly got you back into academia. On your return, did you feel that those charity experiences had given you new ethical skills that you then used?

00:20:13 Latefa — Definitely. I think when I—working with charity—that’s why I don’t want to leave working with charities even if I have some work with the academia. I think people using charities or NGOs, or—we call them. People provide services and support to vulnerable people, to asylum seeking and to refugees. They do—most of the time do casework. They do casework very often without having that knowledge about the plight of these people. For example, I’ve heard an advisor saying, “Yes, resettled or asylum seeker or refugee, they all have the same trauma.” And because you are an academic and because you have that background and that knowledge, you will say. “No. An asylum seeker and a resettled and a refugee will have different kinds of trauma.” So in general we think that asylum seekers are more traumatised than others, than the refugees, or definitely the resettled are not affected by any trauma. So you will then—because you have this knowledge, yeah, and because you have—you know, that anyone that has been forced to leave a country, a community, will be affected by some kind of what we call PTSD. Yeah? Because there’s a loss. Loss of language is number one. Loss of locus of identity is very important. This in-depth knowledge is missing in the charity sector.

00:21:46 Sohail — But what about the other way around? What did you take from the charity sector in terms of your research ethics? What did the charity sector teach you in terms of how you do your research?

00:22:00 Latefa — It teach me—something I was —yeah, just to let you know that I had been in the charity sector before I went to the PhD. Yeah? So I was already—I’d set up my—Swansea asylum seekers women’s group much before I went for my masters and PhD on forced migration, so I was kind of coming from that. That experience showed me that what people were telling me and what I felt myself, because people were researching my life as an asylum seeker and refugee when I arrived, and I was always not very happy with the way interviews were happening. My experience was reflected in their work. So—and it was kind of that’s what pushed me to go and gain more knowledge up to the level of a PhD. And then I went back and I never actually left the charity sector, whether as a volunteer or as a worker now. What I learned from it, I think it’s two way. It is I learned from the charity sector, but the charity sector also learned from me as an academic worker. But it doesn’t always work like that. It is we haven’t—we need to do this. A lot of academics should actually go, whether work or what we maybe call a civic engagement or something, because we need—that relationship is not—sometimes I feel the relationship is not genuine. Because the people—what I learned is—from the people I work with, is if you’re doing the research, tell them why you’re doing this research. I learned this as ethical. If you don’t tell them

why you're doing this research, how it's going to improve their life, they won't engage with you. I've learned this, but I've already know this before. Not harming them is number one of what you need to show. Empathy, I mean, this is something that you—I had before. As I said, I've never left the charity sector, whether as—even when I—the whole time I was doing my PhD, I was still volunteering and working in the charity sector. So I've learned that if you don't have empathy, and I've also learned that so many researches are conducted and not bringing anything to the charity sector. The relationship between the academia and the charity sector and refugees and the committees it's not there. We need to work hard to create that three ways of supporting refugees.

00:24:50 Sohail — Thank you, Latefa. And so just coming to the last couple of questions, what resources are useful for researchers who are looking to develop their ethical skills and practices?

00:25:02 Latefa — Well, there are a lot of good books. My *Place of Reason in Ethics*, I love this book. It is by someone called Stephen Toulmin. It's like my bible. I know it is very old, but it does show you how to respect, how to create that relationship. How to engage, how to develop empathy, how to—and what it is that you want from this research? What it is. Are you—what are you looking for? Are you looking for contributing to the body of knowledge? What it is that you're doing this research for? It's really important that you have this. From that book, well, I mean, it was—I read a long time ago but I still have it all the time. It's like how to reflect on your own positionality. On your own biases. How to be extremely transparent about your own reason why you're doing this research. Yeah, I'm sure there are more books on ethics when conducting research framed on different conceptual frameworks, which mine is a social constructionist and feminist method and framework. There are many books. I love it. It's a good book. I advise people to read it. Any PhD student or anyone who is concerned about ethics should read this book.

00:26:28 Sohail — Thank you. It feels like one of the things which has come out through our conversation is about authenticity. Because you keep coming back to genuineness and transparency, and I think there's something about authenticity in researchers that perhaps is an important ethical skill or virtue. I wanted to just end by asking you—we're asking all our guests this because this is something we're considering developing. To what extent do you think ethical guidelines would be useful in helping researchers improve their ethical skills? Are guidelines something that you look at and use or is it something that you think skills are developed through practice?

00:27:09 Latefa — I think it's something to develop, to practice. I go back to my example of having received all those emails. And to be honest, it was a strong intellectual exercise within myself, and then I shared with my supervisor that, "What should I do? What can I—what should I do?" And then it was also following a conversation with the ethical committee and then they said, "Okay, you can use it. Because her sending emails means she—the consent is there." Yeah. And there's actually a good article on email—yeah, ethics and email. And then—so I used it. I analysed the data, I put it on site, and as I told you, I left and abandoned a PhD. Went back to another university which has developed different and more stronger, I would say, ethical form. And that emails, that it was about using or not using those emails. So I think that when you engage in research that is highly sensitive or highly—like mine, you need to be prepared. Yes, you have a guideline, but you can develop a guideline. But by continuing respecting the value, the norm, the—having empathy, respecting and not harming, respecting your field work. You need to have a great respect and empathy towards your field work, and that will help you develop or go a bit outside of your guideline but still by being rigorous, by reflecting, by—Yeah. I don't know if I've replied to your question, but I don't know if I'm clear enough. But, yes, you have your guideline and you—I always say this to my students. "This is the form, three pages. You have to sign this form which includes confidentiality and consent and all the guideline. You have to explain your research, making sure they understand and they agree. But also there are situations in which you'll have to come back to us as a person, an ethical committee created to support the course, and we can discuss aspects of your research or a situation in your research. That you will have to maybe go outside of this, but by continuing to respect

the person you're researching, to respect your research, the good of the whole community you are researching and not harming anyone."

00:29:55 Sohail Thank you very much for that. Yeah. So—again, so what I took is that respect is a key value and virtue of being an ethical researcher. And sometimes things don't quite go as planned, but if you keep to that value then you should be able to do ethical research, even if it's not exactly as you had anticipated. And I think that's a really, really nice point to end on. So I am very grateful, Latefa, for your time and hopefully our listeners are too. And so next episode, we are going [downtempo electronic music fades in] to talk a bit about sharing ethical knowledge and how one way of going past some of our ethical dilemmas is to talk about them with other researchers or relevant communities. So we'll be talking to you, Tanya Mackay from the McPin Foundation. So please join us for that and see you soon. [music fades out]

[End of recording]