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Ethics in Qualitative Research: María Cristina Quevedo-Gómez on Culture and Ethics

Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
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[downtempo electronic music 00:00:00—00:00:10]

00:00:10 Sohail Hi. I am Sohail Jannesari. I am a migration researcher and activist. And today I am very lucky to be with you and hosting the *Qualitative Open Mic* podcast. This series is on ethics and we aim to highlight positive ethical practices in qualitative research, particularly with marginalised groups. And in each episode, we're going to ask whether ethical guidelines are useful and what ethical guidelines may be needed. We're also going to explore how we can make ethics as effective and meaningful and kind as possible. So today we are very lucky to have with us Cris, who is going to be talking a bit about an ethics without borders. So, Cris, would you like to introduce yourself and tell us a bit about who you are?

00:01:06 María Cristina Thank you, Sohail. First of all, thank you for the invitation. I'm glad to be here. I'm María Cristina Quevedo-Gómez, that's my full name, and I am a principal professor at the School of Medicine and Health Sciences at Rosario University in Colombia, South America. What I do is work together with non-academics to produce knowledge together, basically. So working with populations and trying to produce knowledge together in a set of participatory action research projects. In addition to that, of course, I have academic obligations. I'm a teacher at the university. Today, I'm going to focus on the collaborations that I have been working with international institutions, mainly universities or research institutes, and how I have been trying to induce these institutions to work in participatory action research projects that, in my opinion, contribute better to maintain justice principles for these international collaborations in research.

00:02:12 Sohail Great, thanks. So can you get into some of the detail around that? So what are the key principles you go on when you're trying to build these international collaborations and partnerships? What are the sort of ethics of your partnership building?

00:02:27 María Cristina For international partnerships, I think the most important elements or ethical principle is moral integrity. [chuckles] And when I talk about moral integrity, I'm looking at what we have right now in global health. Countries having unequal distributions of resources. Also, different types of human groups or human beings having different resources, allocations and resource distribution, and that ends up in a global inequality, right? So when we are set up in this context of global inequality what we need is moral integrity as researchers, as human beings, and trying to ensure that we are doing the best for the people we are working with. And so principles such as beneficence are fundamental. The idea is not to do harm, right? [chuckles] But also to do the best good we can for those persons. And for doing the best good we can, we need, of course, to have accurate information and fairly distribute information for the people we are working with, so that we are not asking them for informed consent that is not really informed. So that they have all the information that they need to make a decision. So that brings me to the next one, and it is fundamental to have participatory designs in these type of collaborations. Because when we think of participatory designs in terms of projects—academic projects or research projects, we are including all persons or human beings involved in those projects as equal partners. And when we talk about equal partners, it is we all take decisions together. So these participatory designs for me are fundamental in being able to create this moral integrity, or to make it real, right? And of course before I mentioned the moral integrity, I mentioned that it's relevant to be aware of the different power levels, the different resource levels, the different conditions. Even living conditions of each human being. So these are, for me, three fundamental elements. When building up international collaborations of course we have donors, right? And those donors, in my opinion, need to have the principle of knowledge exchange or knowledge co-production, instead of knowledge transferring that releases some power differences somehow.

00:05:02 Sohail That's brilliant. Thank you so much. That's super clear. So is the implication here that if there is international collaboration and people aren't using participatory methods and they're perhaps using more traditional methods, then that context is ripe for an

unequal partnership or an exploitative partnership? I think that's quite a significant and substantial point. Because if you think about it, I would say in the context of global health it's—sort of most [chuckles] international partnerships are doing work which isn't based on participatory principles. And I'd imagine that a lot of people might be a bit annoyed by the suggestion that they have to do it. So I'd love to hear more.

00:05:45 María Cristina [laughs] Well, I don't want to force anyone to do [chuckles] participatory action research. But what I can tell from my experience of around doing this type of research is that traditional research methods are implying that the researcher is the one who holds the truth and who knows the know-how. And when you think you know the know-how, somehow you are forcing the populations to follow your know-how, without actually actively listening to what they need, or how they want to solve their own problems. And in terms of global health, what we have is a lot of huge human problems. In complete human rights not met. And so when you think that as a scientist you hold the truth and you know what the people need, somehow you are missing half of the—or not even half, even more of the situation. Because the people who are going to tell you, "I don't take my medications because I have been told by the doctor that I have to eat before eating the medications, and I don't have anything to eat. So [blows raspberry] [chuckles] I'm not going to be able to take medications anyway." So you are missing a lot. What my advice would be is, try to make your traditional research the most open for listening to the voice of participants, right? And the persons with whom you are working, or for whom you are working on your research, try to open the doors for them to tell you what their problem is. Listen carefully. With qualitative research, that's always very possible. And then you can add some of those traditional methods. Like, just say, a focus group, or perhaps a couple of previous interviews—open-ended interviews, so that people can tell you and you get to know the context and you are not somehow entering like a - quite a rocket in the water, you know?

00:07:45 Sohail Great. Thank you. So building on that, so can you tell me a bit more about that? How is someone really going to understand the context of life in another country if they haven't lived there or if they don't have connections there, or... how does that process happen?

00:08:05 María Cristina Well, again, from my experience being a natural qualitative researcher, just, like, to increase your common sense and trying to figure out, "Who can I talk to to get to know the place?" When I started my field work in one of the main research I have done, it was in my country but it was in a region where I can be a foreigner without any—without any—[chuckles] with clear distinction. So I started by just asking in the plane. People who were sitting next to me and were locals and asking them, "Okay. What is the city I'm going through? You know, tell me a bit about your city? How you live it? How you experience it? What are the pros and the cons of living here?" And in the airport, the same when I took the taxi; trying to find out the situations. "Who holds the power here? Who are the most powerful? Who are the less powerful? What are the social problems?" And there I already filled up myself with lots of contextual information. And the first thing, I contacted a person—my project was on HIV. I contacted a person living on with HIV. I just, you know, found the list of NGOs in the website and I contacted that person and I told the whole story. And that person already gave the full information and became my co-researcher, for example. Loosening up a little bit of structure of scholarship. You know, that science is half the truth. [chuckles] That is my recommendation. You know, we scientists, we unfortunately don't tell the truth. We have to let the people speak to us.

00:09:40 Sohail Great, thanks. But I was wondering, is this knowledge enough? You know, is this understanding—it sounds like a good starting point, and you sort of made other points about what else is needed. But I'm thinking—I guess my question is, can it ever be enough? Because the differences are so stark. And it feels like, okay, knowing a bit about contexts of people's lives and how they live is a good starting point. But it doesn't feel nearly enough, I suppose.

00:10:07 María Cristina No, I clearly have to agree with you that it is materially and virtually impossible to reach the level of equity between a researcher and a local person and make sure that

this inequality that is historically embedded is going to be dissolved in a dialogue. No, obviously not. Being aware of that inequity is of course necessary. This reflexivity also has been told to any of us social researchers; that we have to be aware and write about, of course. But when you make the effort of trying to highlight that we know that there are differences but what we are trying to do at this moment, in this setting of the project, is trying to balance those power differences. It gives enough reassurance to the person who is in an imbalanced situation to know that he or she is in a secure setting and can express himself freely and can also provide opportunities to participate. To give you a clear example, again, with this research I have done in Cartagena, Colombia, there is a clear difference between the co-researcher and me in terms of power. A huge difference in terms of social power, material power, et cetera. But during the whole process of the research, he felt strong enough to produce knowledge together, publish together with us, and also go to the local governors and say, "I have been doing research. I have been publishing research. Here are my results together with the research team, and this is what we need." It does not mean that at the end, the whole power process is going to change between him and me. No. But he could at least escalate a couple of steps higher than if we wouldn't do that effort.

00:12:04 Sohail I wanted to ask you a bit about the influence of culture in the ethics of international partnerships. So, you know, if we are thinking in the context of global health and in the context of Global North and Global South institutions and people working together, in terms of ethics, these personally, I feel like, you know, different countries and different cultures have very different takes on what is ethical. So, you know, at the beginning of this podcast you talked about the importance of moral integrity. Well, what counts as moral integrity? I think there'll be a different interpretation from different partners in an international partnership. So how do you get around that and how do you equate—you know, square that circle, so to speak?

00:12:47 María Cristina Absolutely, absolutely. [chuckles] There are cultural differences in understanding moral integrity, for sure. What I mean with 'moral integrity', in simple words: if I consider myself as a moral integral human being, I wouldn't do anything that does harm to another human being, for instance. Right? So in global health terms, I wouldn't buy products from an enterprise that I know that they are doing child labour, for example. So because they are exploiting somebody else, especially a child. I wouldn't receive money from a donor that I know that the country from this same donor is, for example, sending chemical waste to my country's ocean, for instance. Right? I wouldn't treat without respect one of my students or one of the participants because I believe that I'm in a higher social status, for instance. These types of things that I honestly think we, as humans, we share similar principles. Cultures sometimes try to play the game that, you know, [chuckles] things are different. But if we connect from human fibre, we all feel sad. We all feel happy. We all feel the pain when something happens to us. If we try to connect from this human fibre, either languages or cultures should not intervene in this moral integrity. Isn't the principle of not doing harm to another human being Or even another being, you know? And also, this is what I mean with moral integrity. And it's so basic in global health. As basic as why should countries go into war? [chuckles] You know, why do we need to show power to somebody else by doing these kind of things? This is moral integrity.

00:14:34 Sohail Okay. Cool. Alright. I take your point. There are some universals, perhaps, that we could draw on to have ethical international partnerships. I can take your point there. But I was thinking perhaps, for instance, there's an example of consent and autonomy. So for instance, someone might consent to taking part in a research process. But depending on the political context, the social context, that individual consent might not be sufficient. It might be that, actually, it would be good to get some sort of consent on the community level. And it depends on the culture, I think, of what is moral in that—and I think that's something that could come up a lot in global health.

00:15:14 María Cristina I get your point, but there are clear differences between the ethical committees in each of the places, right? So I had a case that we just had with one of the students that we received from Global Health and from Brighton. In Brighton, the students that are coming to Colombia, they need to get ethical approval there. And some of the

principles that they were asking the students to check for were not enough for us. So he has, anyway, to go through an ethical review here. And he was asking, "Why do you care so much for the students, for example." For instance, because the ethical committee here is absolutely rigid saying students are vulnerable. "It doesn't matter which level the student is, they're vulnerable and we are going to protect him or her." And it's because there are experiences with people violating students in the process of research. So—for that, is fundamental and that was part of the things we were thinking of discussing; the differences in ethical committee's values and why is it important to always let the local ethical committee evaluate the project? You cannot assume that by having ethical approval in the country of origin of the researcher, when coming to a local, especially southern globe country, will be accepted. Obviously there are different laws, there are different regulations and different cultures and things have to go through the local filter, of course. For sure. And that also has to be discussed, also. Because in some of the—in the project that the student had, he was going to evaluate our own collaboration. And so in that own collaboration, the ethical committee didn't consider some elements that for me were fundamental, you know? If he is going to evaluate the work we are doing, well, you know, there are some elements in terms of job securities from both sides and these things that need to be taken into consideration, right? And so I added some extra things to the student that he wouldn't expect [chuckles] but that's how it goes.

00:17:16 Sohail

And that's great. What a brilliant example. Thank you. I think that shows the importance of seeking ethical approval from multiple actors, I guess, and local actors in particular in the research project. So, thank you. I kind of wanted to—so you gave a lovely example there of perhaps ethical change or improvement in a research project across borders. I kind of wanted to know, do you have some really nice examples of global health partnerships that have really worked out? Obviously there's a history of perhaps potentially exploitative partnerships, especially between—with Global North institutions perhaps holding resource and power and publications, and ultimately access to knowledge production. So in that context, I'll be really interested to hear examples of really beautiful partnerships that we can all aspire to.

00:18:11 María Cristina

Yes, for sure. In my academic experience, I have been facing, you know, very positive and very not so positive [chuckles] experiences with international partnerships. The centre of that is the different locations of the power. And so in the not so positive, the location of the power was in a Global North institution. And the person who was, you know, working with me in that collaboration had clearly set up the idea that, I was in an inferior power position, and that has made the huge difference. Whereas in the current collaboration that we are working on right now, Brighton and Sussex University Global Health Centre of Research and the School of Medicine and Health Sciences at Rosario University. And so I'm in charge of that collaboration together with the head of the research centre in Brighton and Sussex. And the difference there that I see is that power is shared. And why is the power shared is, we connect through the human fibre that I said. We were friends at school. At medical school, we studied together. He also comes from the same country I grew up. And we were basically university friends. [chuckles] And when we met, when we were working together in Europe and we happened to have the fortune of working in the same academic topic, and we decided to join efforts. And that's starting from this basic human ground of being friends and respecting each other has made a huge difference in the collaboration. Why? Because every kind of problem—because there have been huge challenges [chuckles] and problems we have been facing. We have been dealing with them based on mutual respect. Knowing that we both do the best work we do in our very different working conditions to make this joint work together. So he recognises that I have completely different working conditions than he has. He recognises that I have also different level of academic titles than he has, and he respects that and tries to make it possible for me to work together with him. You know, instead of pushing, he's facilitating the possibilities for the work. And another fundamental principle from this successful collaboration is that we both have the human drive for doing good for our country of origin. That's what moves our project. It's not that he wants to publish about Colombia or, you know, I need to publish more—no. We want to do good for our people. That's the basic human motivation. And it's because we are emotionally tied to our country of

origin. And so these two elements, human connection between the two researchers and honest motivation [chuckles] to help and to do good for them is fundamental. It's not a perfect collaboration, obviously, because due to all the bureaucracy that we have to deal with in both institutions, they've had delays in the timetables. But again, based on our mutual respect, [chuckles] we try to deal with this bureaucratic institutional problems and all these financial issues based on respect and mutual help. Another very important element that we share there is that we both believe that students need to be treated in an equal manner as any other human being, [chuckles] Students and participants in the research. So both students and participants are treated as researchers as we are, in all our work in the same level. They all have the voice. They all have the vote to decide how to and what to. Right? So we started—for instance, we had a participatory methodology—and we started by asking the population, “What do you think the main problem of HIV—work on HIV is in Colombia?” And we started by developing a research project to find out which are the possible contextual elements and structural and cultural and global dynamics elements who are—that are influencing the current situation in Colombia. And there the main researchers were students and participants, basically. Of course both main researchers officially were we, but the person who really gave the information were the participants and students. And the students are working together with us as any other researcher. Jaime treats them equally. Although he's a high professor, he treats them as, you know, they were the sister and brother. [chuckles] And that's fundamental. I think those have been the most fundamental elements for the successful project.

00:22:54 Sohail

Yeah. No, that was a very thorough answer. Thank you. I just wanted to ask though, it sounds like it really helps that Jaime is not only a childhood friend but also from Colombia. So, as an understanding of that context that we spoke about— so is there something here about perhaps it's more likely that you have sort of ethical international partnerships when a person in a Global North institution actually has a background and understanding and then relationship and connection to the place in the Global South that they're working with? That seems to me an incredible advantage, you know?

00:23:31 María Cristina

Clearly it is an incredible advantage. You can also tell that, not only from the person who is from the same country as Jaime and I are—we share a Colombian origin, not nationality. But I have the same connection, for instance, with you. You know, when I talk with you, and I don't know if you come from the Global South or not, I don't know your background, but I can see that you understand the human struggle of inequality—the global inequality. And I don't need to translate that as I used to need to translate it, for instance, in other collaborations to a person who grew up in the Global North and has been working all the time in the Global North, and has some connections with the Global South and feels that but it's not coming from childhood in that process. You know, it's not having the long-time exposure to that. There is a difference. But also I need—I think I need to express this too. Is it's more an intellectual background—I don't know how to say it. But my father calls it like 'intellectual unconscious' or something like that. And it is that somehow society managed to raise us as kids in a way that it comes to our brains in such a way that structures our whole functioning, right? So when I used to teach students in the Netherlands—and I was explaining to them that in some occasions, the huge depression that they were feeling when they—when this recession of the Euro's own creation started and they were not able to have jobs easily and their human rights were not met immediately—as usually are in those contexts. I was telling them that this depression was usually not a problem of the South because children in the South or Jews in the South need to learn to, you know, sort out any kind of problem to survive. So I was trying to train them in this, “Okay. Turn your lights and sort out the problem. Don't be stuck there.” Right? That is something that for them for living, oh, a long time, twenty, fifteen years, in those always set good conditions was very difficult, right? So it's a matter of being able to understand both. And with this, especially when we talk about the colonisation and these types of issues, I don't want to say that it's not possible to build up good relationships with people who grew up in the North and also have been all the time in the North. On the contrary, if we understand, “Why is this happening? Why is it difficult for them?” We can help a bit

and say, “Hey. This is how we experience.” But they are also human beings and want the good for everyone. And this human being connection is why everything is possible.

00:26:25 Sohail Brilliant. Thank you. What a lovely note to sort of come to the end of this discussion on. I kind of wanted to ask a very quick question before we wrap things up. So, are there any guides or guidelines or resources around international collaborations or partnerships, particularly the ethics of it, that you could share? Or if there’s any other resources that you think might be instructive to people about to embark on an international collaboration?

00:26:52 María Cristina Thank you Sohail for trusting me. [chuckles] But to be very honest, when you asked me that I started looking on the web. And on international collaborations, I couldn’t find much or almost anything. The only thing I found was a WHO document on—and that’s produced by a commission who are the centre of global health ethics or the health ethics that helps the WHO. And I’ve shared that with you, perhaps you can share that with the audience. And what I saw there, or what I read is, they have a good sample of basic ethics in health, and ethics in clinical settings, but also in public health settings and also in global health. And when I looked at the glossary, for example, they were having a good review on different positions. For instance, when they were talking about justice they were saying, “Okay. Justice is this and this and this,” but also there are some different opinions and they give the different opinions. So I think this could be a good resource. And, well, I only have experience with two international collaborations. It’s not that I know a lot of it. [chuckles] So that’s why I say thank you for your trust. But I would say those four elements that I shared at the beginning could be more searched on the web in trying to find out what the people can find. Right.

00:28:11 Sohail Thank you. That’s incredibly helpful, I think. And I appreciate that. To build on a bit of what you’ve said, I think there are texts around decolonisation which are probably quite useful for thinking about international partnerships. I think that gets you thinking about some of the historical contexts and the sort of political oppressions and inequities that still persist. So I would also add that, but thank you so much. And generally thank you so much—Sorry.

00:28:40 María Cristina No. And those terms, I would also definitely advise the audience to look at participatory action methods, for instance. Not only decolonisation documents, but also on—also dependency—the theory of dependency. Remember, this theory of—the dependency theory from the North—from the South depending on the North, and in these knowledge transfer processes and also the power connection to that. So perhaps those two elements are important to understand. And they can always contact me. The audience can always contact me and we can share what we have lived so far.

00:29:20 Sohail Brilliant. Yes. Thank you so much. So—and this is the final episode of the series. So thank you so much, Cris, for giving us a lovely send-off. [downtempo electronic music fades in] And I hope that the listeners have very much enjoyed this series on ethics. It’s definitely a passion of mine and I’ve learned a lot from it. So the next series is going to be on making interpretation, so please do join us then and see you soon. [music fades out]

[End of recording]