

TRANSCRIPT

Equity-based research design with Alison Fox and Alison Buckler

ALISON FOX: So I'm really thrilled to have the opportunity to talk with you, Alison, about the breadth of your experience and particularly focusing today on equity-based research design and some thoughts about how you go about that and how you work with others in that focus. So lovely to have you with us. Thank you.

ALISON BUCKLER: Thank you. It's really nice to be here.

ALISON FOX: So I was thinking we'd have a conversation about entering, a research space and then working through the design or whether that is even your starting point. So I wondered whether I could start with some thoughts about how you come to know your research settings that you want to start to think about some research. And I'm saying that carefully because sometimes, it doesn't come from us, the desire to do some research. So over to you.

ALISON BUCKLER: Yeah. I mean, I think research setting is one of those phrases that comes from maybe a positivist way of thinking about research. And I was reflecting on this question in advance, and I was thinking, well, that suggests that there's this kind of bounded space where the research is happening. And it made me think about the different projects that I'm part of.

And very fortunately, they don't-- I don't kind frame the setting like that. And that's because they have all evolved over a much longer period of time through relationships with different colleagues. And so when I think of the setting in my mind, it's more-- it's not the school or community learning hub as such. It's just a kind of part of the world where something is happening that a team of us are really interested in.

And so, for me, it's really important to think of the setting not as a sort of discrete place, but somewhere which is as porous as our own-- part of somewhere in our own lives is our own schools or our own learning centres and thinking more about the people that interact with that space and who know about that space.

And then I think that really comes back to a key part of the way I try to work and research. And that's through just investing in relationships with people who bring us all sorts of different understandings of that space to the project. So I would say, in terms of learning about the setting, it involves getting to know people who might have different perspectives about it.

ALISON FOX: Absolutely. No, that's great. So it might be worth just pushing that a little further into-- so where do the research intentions, agendas come from if it's you with others in these spaces.

ALISON BUCKLER: Yeah. I mean, like you alluded to earlier, sometimes as researchers, we have to take on a project that we have very little input into the research questions. And in that case, we might have a different approach to thinking about how we move on from there. But really, again, especially with projects like Iballi, I've just been so lucky to be working with these people for nearly 10 years.

And the research questions are they're genuinely the things that we sit up talking about late at night or at airports. And we've just been so lucky with Iballi that we've been able to translate those late-night delayed flights, the conversations we have into a really exciting research project.

And for us, it was about-- we were interested in storytelling and the relationship between storytelling and inclusion, both in terms of how storytelling can help us to learn more about inclusion, but also how storytelling in itself is an inclusive research approach or could be more inclusive. And really, it was a sort of evolving critique on our practice and thinking about the work that we do that underpinned and refined the research questions that we then took into the project.

ALISON FOX: Yeah. So I mean, I had a question that we were thinking about in advance about recruiting into your project. But when it's a project that's evolved in the way that you've been talking about, that's a sort of collective task. So can you just talk a little bit about how you then move from the people that are in there at the start to generating a project that includes more people, whether that's involved as researchers or as participants?

ALISON BUCKLER: Yeah. I mean again with-- well, with two of the big projects I work on, one is the Iballi Project, which is looking at inclusion in schools in Nigeria, South Africa, and the UK. And another big project I have is-- that I work on is one on community learning hubs in Zimbabwe for adolescent girls who hadn't been able to attend formal school.

And while those projects came about very differently-- I explained how Iballi came about-- the other one was very much more of an NGO-led program looking for some research around those community education hubs. So the questions were more sort of there. But again, with the partners, it's about bringing people in who bring different perspectives on things.

And so one of-- with Zimbabwe work, we've been really lucky to be able to work with not just the NGO in the UK, but also the NGO in Zimbabwe. And then through that, the community mobilisers who are already working in the communities who know the young women personally.

And just having trust in those relationships, I think, is really important and recognizing that there's absolutely-- recognizing what you can bring to a research project and being confident about that and not thinking that, as the principal investigator on paper, that you have or could even do all the different jobs that need doing. So it's really about building trust with partners and really creating a community of understanding each other's expertise and what everybody brings to a project because I think, often, we talk about minimizing power and hierarchy. And I think it's so important to keep that in mind. But also, to keep in mind that often that's not possible because structures are so rigid. So what can you do within those structures to recognise people's expertise and their agency and just make sure everybody feels that they're contributing to the project in a way that is meaningful for them and that they will-- the project will end with everybody feeling like they got what they needed from it in terms of their learning.

ALISON FOX: So yeah, that trust. So what sort of factors do you think are, or from your experiences have you-- you've come to really appreciate or important in developing that trust? And I'm particularly thinking in a research context because maybe one of the things that is something that has come to know and be known during the project is what research is and what this project is. So I don't know whether you could speak a little bit more about that.

ALISON BUCKLER: Yeah. For me, building trust can't be rushed. And I think there are certain tools that you can incorporate into a project to support the building of trust. And they can be very effective.

But I also think it takes time. And it happens in the small moments. And I do lots of work with Jennifer Agbaire, who's a lecturer in our faculty. And we have spent so many hours dealing with very difficult logistical challenges in very remote places with no Wi-Fi, with no aircon, with broken down buses.

And it's the relationship that we've built as colleagues as co-researchers through those challenges that enables us to work so well together in a more intellectual sense. And I think that people who aren't working in international contexts maybe don't have those experiences of things breaking down in quite the same way.

But it's even just sort of taking the time to go for lunch together or have coffee together or stay 10 minutes after an online meeting just to ask how their dog is and things like that, it's those small moments, I think, that trust builds up. And they're really, really important not to neglect.

ALISON FOX: Yeah. Sure, sure. So you've mentioned already the sort of structural inequalities that we're living in globally, but also at different scales and the sort of marginalizations that you may be aware of when you go in, but then also that you become aware of. Can you talk about how you've gone to mitigate those? You've alluded to already, but some illustrations would be great.

ALISON BUCKLER: Yeah. So I work in international education. A lot of the teams I work in are across geographical boundaries, across kind of career stage boundaries, across career boundaries. We're working with people with very different jobs, all on the same team trying to contribute to the research.

And I think, in a way, that there's been quite a lot written about those power dynamics across between the UK and ex-colonial contexts and things like that. And so I think it's incredibly important. And I'm very, very conscious of them.

But what's increasingly becoming clear to me are often more subtle power dynamics in research teams. And one of the things that we've noticed in some recent projects is, even in the context of working in UK teams, the power dynamics between someone who has a permanent academic contract and someone who is a sort of working half day a week on the project on a kind of fixed term, short term contract for you, but also on a fixed term contract for another institution.

It has no kind of job security. It might not have any input into the ref and might feel very vulnerable about their contribution. And I think what's been really interesting with some of the projects recently is those power dynamics being surfaced where maybe, if you were in a Teams call, you'd look very similar. You'd be in the same sort of house in the same context. And yet those hidden power dynamics can really have an influence on how people feel about being part of a research team. And in terms of how you mitigate them, it's very difficult because you're trying to push back against the academic precarity and insecure contracts and a lack of funding and all these big things that are very difficult for us to influence.

But again, I think it's just about taking the time to recognise that those power dynamics exist and listening to people when they tell you what the impact of them is because I've definitely overlooked that. And then when someone has pointed it out, it's been quite a surprise. And I think it's just learning to listen and taking the time to think about what you can do as a PI to

make things better for them in a quite in a very small sphere of influence that you might be able to have.

ALISON FOX: Yeah. And this is where I really found the credit taxonomy really, really helpful in mapping out the sort of 14 roles and really working with teams to allocate who contributed to those roles and, as you say, not trying to make sure that people haven't been overlooked, whether that's in the authorship of the paper or whether that's in the sort of acknowledgments.

ALISON BUCKLER: Yeah.

ALISON FOX: But yeah, no. That's really important for us all to do wherever we are in the world.

ALISON BUCKLER: Yeah. And I think it's important to not assume what people want to get out of a research project. And again, this goes back to maybe the more international examples.

I'm very-- I'm always very conscious about co-authoring and recognizing people's contributions in that headline of who wrote that paper. I think that I agree with the credit taxonomy. I think it's very important that contributions might not be as obvious as you think, but they're still really important to how the research happened.

But at the same time, when you're working with people-- lots of our NGO colleagues in Zimbabwe, for example-- having their name on a paper is not that important to them. And they don't have the time to invest in that. And so really, what would be meaningful for them in relation to the project output? Where would they like their name to be seen?

And it probably wouldn't be-- it might not be on an academic article. It might be in a much more public facing document. And so I think, yeah, just not making assumptions about what people want to get out of the project, but creating spaces within the project where those conversations can be had around where people want to be at the end of it and how you can all work together to facilitate that.

ALISON FOX: Yeah. And that's why the acknowledgments section can be very important, as you say, whether it's on a paper that's in an academic space or whether it's on public facing websites. And yeah, no, that's really interesting.

And I guess, I'm chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the moment and really wanting to support equity-based research in whatever ways most helpful as people develop projects in the way that you've talked about.

But fundamentally, again, we've got structures and systems and sets of principles and things that we hold here that will be value systems and ways of thinking about living, being, becoming, coming to know as different in other contexts. So I particularly wanted to talk about just your thoughts on how we go about not dumping our ethics and our values onto the settings, if I'm allowed to use that, as you framed it.

ALISON BUCKLER: Yeah. Well, one of my favourite metaphors is from one of our own colleagues, Bukola Oyinloye, who wrote some fantastic papers based on her PhD about using a Nigerian code of ethics in tandem with the university frameworks. And I just thought her work so excellent. I really recommend it.

But the metaphor that she used is that after the first year of the PhD, she felt ready to go into the field. She had this backpack, which was her university ethics, her parachute. She kind of jumped out the plane with his parachute and felt really secure this parachute would open. It did. It got her down to the community in which she was researching. And then she got there and the parachute was just sort of dragging behind her. And she knew it had been really important. But also, in that space, it wasn't quite working.

And I just think that's such a great way of thinking about how we combine the frameworks that we have to work within and then the frameworks that we choose to work within and the communities that we choose to work within and how we can bring them together more meaningfully.

And I really think that and The Open University's Ethics Committee-- I examine lots of PhDs and work with lots of colleagues in different institutions. And I've never met anybody who has the same kind of supportive environment for talking about research ethics that we have at The Open University. And I think people often assume that the Ethics Committee is this sort of faceless committee behind a website and maybe don't realise that you can go and talk to them.

And we've just learned so much through the conversations that we've had with your team and the feedback we've got. And I think one of the most important things was when we were doing our Iballi Project, which was working with young people and teachers in three different contexts. And in collaboration with you, we came up with the idea that we could submit an iterative ethics approval, which just worked so well because it just not only meant that, for each stage of the project, we were able to tailor our actions to the specific contexts we were working with at that point in the project.

But it also built in a mechanism for us to be able to learn and innovate and develop our own thinking and our own research practice. And so I think maybe more encouragement for people to think about ethics as an iterative process is really important, rather than thinking that ethics is something you do at the start of the project and then it's actually quite happy to change it later on.

ALISON FOX: Yeah, absolutely. And we really would welcome people going to somewhere and finding out that this-- it's not thinking it's a fixed approach that you've come with. But if you need to develop a new approach, which would have new ways of working, new protocols, then to come back and explain, as people become more expert in their setting in a setting that we're not expert as a committee, then to tell us and to come back with not an amendment that something's gone wrong but actually something could be much better and much richer and much more worthwhile.

So yeah, we highly encourage people to think about getting to know the setting and build those relationships. And then come, when you're ready, with what's the next stage of the research. And I guess, to see it through-- we've entered a setting. We've built relationships. We've talked a way through, and we've thought a bit about publications.

And I guess thinking, finally, about exiting the research and avoiding that notion of helicoptering in and helicoptering out, which obviously, you've said, this is much richer and part of ongoing conversations. So have you got any sort of final thoughts about equity in that sort of legacy from projects?

ALISON BUCKLER: I think it's really important to recognise that what I'm about to say comes from a huge position of privilege of having funded projects over a long period of time. I think if you're thinking about this question as a PhD student, for example, it's much, much harder to maintain those relationships and to maintain the feeling of equity within the project.

But in terms of-- so the two projects we've been talking about today, for example, in Iballi, way that we've been able to maintain or try to maintain that feeling of people feeling invested in the work is that we already had an iterative consent process. This comes from-- and we work our partner's transformative story. And this consent process comes from their work.

So when people consent to-- when they sign their consent form at the start of the research, they are consenting to be part of the workshop. And that's it. They're consenting to participate. Then after the workshop, when we know what kind of data has been generated, when they are more aware of what they've kind of contributed, then we have another consent form, which is, OK, so this is what you shared with us. How do you want us to use this?

And we really leave that up to the participants as much as possible. So we give them options so we can use that work, the data just in the analysis. We can talk about it at different events. And we kind of name the different kinds of events that we might be talking about their work at. We talk about whether we can use it in publications. We talk about whether we can put it online.

And it's really interesting how much thought people put into that. And so, for example, this project was about inclusion. And some people were really happy for us to use their data at workshops and events on inclusion but not on storytelling because they felt very much they joined the project to talk about inclusion. And so we really respect those decisions, obviously. And then what we do a year later is we go back and say, look, you were fresh out of this workshop. How do you feel about it now, a year later? And that has been a really interesting. And most people feel the same. They've kept their consent the same.

But some people have said, well, actually a year ago I said this. But now, actually, if you show my story, they created then, could you make these changes? And it's just really nice to be able to say, yes, we can do that and honour that and then let them know if we show their story again, that we have made those changes. And so that's one way we've been able to do it with Ibali.

And then with the Zimbabwe research, a really wonderful development is, so six years ago, we were working with an NGO partner and with this group of young women who had not been in formal school. We did three years of storytelling workshops with them. And they're just absolutely fantastic, incredibly articulate and insightful, brilliant young women.

And then in this new phase of funding that we got this year, we want-- the NGO partners want to well, what's next for these communities, community education programs. We know the immediate impact of them. But what happens two or three years after someone leaves? And so what we've been able to do is, because we've still got this really good relationship with the partner and that's been absolutely fundamental, they have found-- they've reconnected with three of these young women. And we're paying them to be research assistants in this next phase of the research. And we've just had a workshop with them in Zimbabwe. And it was just absolutely incredible.

And one of the things that I wanted to reference, in terms of our conversation about ethics, is these young women speak Shona, which is a Zimbabwean language. And my co-PI on the project, Faith Mkwanzani is Zimbabwean. And she does a lot of hard work translating. And we had-- when we were designing the research, we had a whole afternoon on research ethics. But there's no word for research ethics in Shona. So we had to have a whole conversation about what the most-- what's the closest translation of ethics in Shona.

And that led to one of the richest discussions on research ethics that I've ever had. And because we weren't taking this term ethics for granted and pulling out all of things that we associate with research ethics, we were having to think about words like conduct and relationships. And then that helped us to really move to a completely different starting point about what research ethics mean and how we're going to work together as a team and how those young women are going to be researchers in their community.

And so one of the things that made me think about was how we-- just so often, we just take things for granted when we think about equity and ethics. And the terminology doesn't help. And we just assume other people know what we mean when we say it. And taking it back to those really kind of different starting points has been really helpful in terms of getting people on the same page about what we mean about equity and what we mean about ethics and research.

ALISON FOX: So really, well, I'd love to read more about that, if that ever finds itself in print, and the questions would be where that should be written up and by whom. And so thanks so much, Alison, for sharing your experiences and talking about, again, the sort of breadth of opportunities that you've had to build relationships and where that's taken you and them. So thanks very much.

ALISON BUCKLER: Thank you.