

TRANSCRIPT

Formulating research questions with Jennifer Agbaire and Joanne Jordan

JOANNE JORDAN: Good morning, Jennifer. Thank you for coming today to have what's supposed to be a short discussion about some of the issues that are raised in the OpenLearn article that I put together on EDI, when we're-- EDI considerations, when we're trying to formulate our research questions.

And the first question I want to ask you about is, as you know that article raises some contextual issues about the impact on the inclusion of EDI and the formulation of questions about what can impact on the inclusion. And from your own experience, can you talk a little about the issues that you have found to be relevant in your own work?

JENNIFER AGBAIRE: Yes, yes. Thank you so much for having me, Joanne. Indeed, the article had talked about two fundamental issues around funders' priorities and the evidence base in terms of the inherent biases that they might embed. And my experience has aligned with those because these are really important influences to be conscious of. But alongside these, I know that there is a variety of other positionalities from which different researchers often do operate.

I work with PhD students, for example, and then other colleagues who are doing small-scale practitioner research that are not funded. And I myself have been involved in research where the funders didn't really have a vested interest in the details of the research process, including the specific questions that I was writing. They had offered this funding as part of a wider initiative, some kind of scholarship where the applicants could just work on a topic that really is burning for them and interesting to them.

So this, then, in cases like this, the researcher seems to have some relative independence to become a bit more EDI-conscious, a little bit freer from these influences of the funders. That's the supposition. And then, the responsibility then shifts more to the researcher to recognise and embed EDI to have that understanding, the relevant learning that will help them to do so. And because as your article has said, particularly, it's not all the time that funders have made the initiative to ensure that beads and research processes reflect EDI principles that this has translated practically to practice.

So a challenge really becomes when it is, the researcher, who has the burden, so to speak. It shouldn't be a burden, but it's a complex thing to do to really ensure that they are being conscious of EDI in the formulating of their questions. It might be a bit tricky where they're not funded, but again, in my experience, most research, whether funded or not funded, is often

guided by some kind of institutional culture, some institutional priorities that also tend to influence researchers thinking about what questions might be deemed relevant.

In the OU, for example, we do have our challenges that we want to tackle because we have identified these challenges as important. So researchers who are within the OU space, we want to think about what questions will speak to those kind of questions. So in that case, it depends on how strong the commitment of that institution is to EDI, how great their infrastructure is in promoting EDI. Otherwise, it can become very tough for researchers to try to execute EDI principles in formulating their questions. I'll stop there.

JOANNE JORDAN: I've been thinking while you've been talking, and there's a couple of things you'll know that past couple of years, maybe a bit longer than that, there's just been this burgeoning of guidance, statements of intent about, oh, yes, EDI, and we all know that it flows from what was happening politically across the world and partly a response to that. So there's been this awakening if you like amongst funders.

Whenever I was doing the reading for that piece, one of the things that really struck me most, we need to be conscious of this potential for tourism, for health equity tourism, where people who don't really know what it is that they could or should be doing become involved, and they might have the best of intentions. But they can deliver, really. Does that make sense?

JENNIFER AGBAIRE: Absolutely. It does, Joanne. I think, like everything else, it's really easy for concepts and principles that have to do with inclusion, diversity and equity to be hijacked, if I may use the word, because people are well meaning when they set out to want to-- but just like everything else, when you try to begin to structure things and have particular fixed ways of doing things or have templates and those kinds of things, what then happens, it becomes there's this pressure that it has to be done in particular ways. It has to be done as a condition for something else.

And it's then very difficult to balance that pressure with an earnest commitment to learn and to be personally aware about what it means to do it within your research practice. So I think being conscious of that is really important. But for those who institute the rules, institutions who want to really enable and promote EDI and researchers who also want to do this. So the line between compliance and true commitment can be very thin sometimes, and that is something we need to be very aware of.

JOANNE JORDAN: Yeah, and I think you've hit the nail on the head, Jennifer. I think that learning-- I think that personal learning and a commitment to learning, a commitment to awareness, self-questioning, being open to criticism, to all of those things is really important if it's not going to become a tick box exercise in some respects and being aware that you might

make mistakes, you might say the wrong thing, and there's quite a lot of this for me personally, but the commitment is there.

And that's the most important thing. OK. I've got a follow-up question to what we've been talking about. We've both just made very clear. But you in particular about what the challenges are. And there are many challenges to ensuring that research questions are informed by EDI principles. What are your thoughts, again, based on your own experience about how researchers can rise to these challenges, can make them?

JENNIFER AGBAIRE: I think we touched on that when we were even talking just that. One of the fundamental steps, I think, for researchers. And this is something that is personal within my own practice is to really develop that awareness of what the relationship is between research and EDI. We cannot assume that we know. We cannot take for granted that we know what will be good for our participants, for our collaborators, for people who will be impacted by our research.

We also cannot assume that our positionality is understood when we go out to write these questions and formulate them. We have to be transparent and reflexive about these things. We have to acknowledge the limitations that we might face. We have to try to provide clarity in the ways that we are forming the questions so that it's quite clear how we are interpreting them from our positioning.

So what I've tried to do-- and I'm increasingly aware of how difficult this is, having dealing with my own PhD students, dealing with colleagues, and working in the international education and development space-- is that as much as possible I try to proactively engage with those for whom the research matters. This might be my participants. This might be my participants and wider stakeholders who have charge over my participants.

JOANNE JORDAN: Yeah.

JENNIFER AGBAIRE: Just always making the questions relevant and then thinking quite strategically from the onset about what impact I'm looking to achieve with the research questions that might matter to the participants. One way to do that has been to engage them from the beginning, thinking about the design, thinking about the purpose because the questions come from the objectives that we've set for the research and the outcomes that we're looking to achieve.

So involving them in that process of deciding what might be relevant, finding ways to make that happen is usually a useful way that has been-- that has worked for me, and also, really being conscious about intersectionality. So it's the focus of my research has always been on inclusion from an intersectionality lens, but not all research would do that.

But it doesn't mean that questions for any research should not be approached from that intersectional lens, focusing on the specific contexts, but also identifying what kinds of differences across or within the groups that you're dealing with or that the research is about or that the research will impact-- would matter because within groups, there are subgroups, and there are subgroups, again, within those groups. So it's really important to look at the questions from those different multiple of intersecting lenses. And somehow we can then-- we can be capturing these differences as much as possible within our questions.

JOANNE JORDAN: Yeah, it's really interesting what you say about engaging with your collaborators, and we could talk about that for another hour or so. That can be difficult. And again, one of the things that I touch on in the article is this notion of, which is permeated research for decades now about hard-to-reach groups.

And over the past few years, again, based on the research I did for the article, it's clear that notion of hard to reach is being dismantled and rightfully so. Have you any experience of ways in which-- again, going back to this notion of time tech, and does it take longer? If it does take longer, does it pay off. So what's been your experience of that?

JENNIFER AGBAIRE: I think researchers will always be undertaking the work that we do. We would always have constraints, and we would have time constraints. We would have constraints that are budget- or resource-limited. It's just the way that it is. And if we continue to work within these constraints, then we would have to keep thinking innovatively and creatively about what's possible out there.

And it's not about looking at-- I think what has helped me personally is, I do not see EDI as something that is perfect out there as trying to achieve this very perfect picture. I've included all of the voices that should be included. I have made sure that they are all happy with the inclusion that I have tried to do. I have met them. We would not do anything eventually. I think what's helped me is to picture it as an incremental step towards this bigger picture.

JOANNE JORDAN: Yeah.

JENNIFER AGBAIRE: Right? And so I've talked, for example, glowingly about how I'm trying to feature multiple voices, collaborating, and all. This might seem very impractical and unattainable for some very well-meaning PhD researchers, but that's not an excuse. Just that

they are not-- it's not possible to reach them or I can't reach all of them, I don't think it's really an enough excuse to circumvent what needs to be done.

I think it's about thinking about how can I negotiate the constraints that I have. Thinking in that kind of way is positive enough. EDI is about demonstrating and commitment rather than the achievement of that perfect research endeavour. So being reflexive, again, I keep coming back to this. And trying to, what would you have done differently if you had time to do it? And what are you doing in your next research endeavour to accommodate this thing that you would have done differently because time didn't let you?

Are you trying to prepare more time to [INAUDIBLE]. Are you saying, "Hey, funder, I'm going to need 16 months instead of six months, and I have evidence of why this is needed because EDI matters and this is why?" So we begin to make more constructive arguments, more believable arguments, more convincing arguments because of that commitment to make those incremental steps that make all the difference. And I think that's what has allayed my own anxiety about, oh, my god, I've never achieved this because it's just a whole big, big, big, big endeavour to step out into.

JOANNE JORDAN: Yeah, I couldn't agree with you more. And in actual fact, one of the ways that I have reconciled my concerns, my anxieties about it, is absolutely to see it as an incremental as an incremental process that I can be engaged in, I can help move forward, I will never do it perfectly because nothing is perfect. But if I-- because I think what we've done when [INAUDIBLE – PLEASE CONFIRM Togon ?] [? is, ?] we've set up a nice thread because as long as the commitment, which is what we started out at the beginning, as long as the commitment is there, the learning, the time to learn and to reflect, which is then materialises or translated into your practice, then step by step, we all move forward.

JENNIFER AGBAIRE: Yeah, I totally agree with you, negotiating those cultures, acknowledging that we can't always do everything once we come from that space, that we can't do everything at one moment. But we are committed to continuing to make authentic and impactful the process that we are into. I think we can make some really and overtly challenging the status quo, irrespective of whether it's a small scale or big scale. Your principles are your principles. If they are EDI-centric, then you don't need time to see them. You just actually see them.

JOANNE JORDAN: Yeah, we've actually strayed on to what was going to be my final question is because as we were talking, and we've setting the challenge up, it could seem absolutely unobtainable to especially to people who are either myself who have right along their career. But this is a relatively new step that they're taking or journey or whatever you

want to call it, but also for PhD researchers with limited funds or whatever, they could have been thinking, well, that's great, but I'll never do that.

But you've managed to say, well, you don't have to do it all if you do something. Is there anything else that you want to finish? Is there anything else that you would want to say on the back of your experience about trying to allay any other anxieties that researchers like myself and much younger might have?

JENNIFER AGBAIRE: I think it's just to say that even more experienced, we always think that also equity, diversity, and inclusion will look the same over decades that this is constantly evolving. So I don't think we should beat ourselves up, whether we are upcoming, whether we're young, whether we are inexperienced at the moment because even most, much more experienced researchers are still grappling with the complexity and the ever-evolving nature of what's meaningful EDI should look like in the questions that we ask for our research.

And that alone means that just keeping the conversation going, keeping the dialogue on and keeping that commitment to wanting to improve, wanting to learn about how best to do that, trying to engage as much as possible with the participants where possible, or engage with representations of them that are true, even if you can't reach them, gives you a greater insight. So learning is really key. Being open to learn about how best to position your research and your questions is always there. You can't go wrong with knowledge, is what I would say.

JOANNE JORDAN: Brilliant and a brilliant line to end on. Thank you very much.