

Speaker information

- Sohail Jannesari (Interviewer) (Sohail)
- Weeam Hammoudeh (Speaker 1) (Weeam)
- Layth Hanbali (Speaker 2) (Layth)
- Zeina Amro (Speaker 3) (Zeina)

Qualitative Open Mic: Qualitative Controversies

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- 00:00:09 Sohail Hi, I'm Sohail, a migration rights researcher and academic. I am very pleased to welcome you to the *Qualitative Open Mic*, which is hosted by the very lengthy named Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre. This series is on controversies and qualitative health research from contentious methodologies to polarising topics. We try and delve into controversies in a sensitive and nuanced way. So, today we are very, very lucky to have with us, not one, not two, but three podcast guests. We are going to be talking about qualitative health research in Palestine, and I'm very pleased to ask them each to introduce themselves. So, Weeam, would you like to start?
- 00:00:52 Weeam Sure. Thank you for having us. My name is Weeam Hammoudeh. I'm an assistant professor at the Institute of Community and Public Health at Birzeit University in Palestine. And I'm also one of the co-directors of the Palestine Program for Health and Human Rights, which is a joint program between Birzeit University and the FXB Centre at Harvard University. And I'll hand it over to Layth.
- 00:01:18 Layth Thank you. Thanks so much for hosting us and great to be a part of this conversation. My name is Layth Hanbali. I am a researcher in community health at Birzeit University at the Institute of Community and Public Health as well. And also recently I've been working with the Institute for Palestine Studies on a project to document the targeting and destruction of the health sector in Gaza during the genocide.
- 00:01:43 Zeina My name is Zeina Amro. I'm a part-time lecturer at Birzeit University in the Social and Behavioural Sciences Department as well as the Institute of Community and Public Health. I do consultancies with non-governmental organisations in the field of mental health as well as recently starting to practice as a mental health counsellor on my own. And I've been part of research at ICPH previously as well.
- 00:02:13 Sohail Brilliant. Thank you so much. So, just to begin with, a kind of very broad question: can you describe the current situation in Palestine and how it's affecting daily life and work for Palestinian health researchers?
- 00:02:26 Layth I think it's important to think about the current moment, both in its complexity, but also in the fact that it's a continuation to policies that we've witnessed for decades. So obviously the most striking thing to talk about right now is the genocide that's being carried out in Gaza, which carries with it, you know, the killing of essentially all kind of vital sectors. So it's a whole kind of war biosphere that is affecting universities which will have been destroyed, schools, seventy percent of which have been destroyed, farmland, two thirds of which has been destroyed. The healthcare sector, obviously the vast majority of which has been destroyed. But also, you know, the complete dismantling of all forms of life, whether human or otherwise, which, you know, is obviously an exception in the brutality and intensity of it. That in fact represents a continuation of the exercise of Zionist sovereignty over Palestinian bodies and systems, which makes it actually at the same time very comparable to what's going on in the rest of Palestine. So within the West Bank and within 1948 occupied Palestine, we also see

Zionist sovereignty being increasingly intensifying over the bodies and systems that rule over Palestinians and that cause, you know, suffering, poverty, complete kind of marginalisation on every level. So within the West Bank, for example, we see restrictions on movement, restrictions on labour, we see basic needs being—on a daily basis being attacked. So, you know, government employees, which form the biggest part of the labour market, have had large parts of their wages withheld for several months now. And day labourers and wage labourers within the Israeli market, to which we are captive, have also had their income denied since the 7th of October. And so you've got these kind of basic needs that are not being met and then you can see that being then—having ramifications for every other sector, including health, including education, including, you know, the basic things like being with family and friends. As well as intensifying demolitions, evictions of already marginalised communities, particularly Bedouin communities, particularly communities in the Jordan Valley, as well as increasing settler attacks on areas that are also having their land confiscated for settlement building. You've got within 1948 Palestine intensifying marginalisation, criminalisation of even being Palestinian and expressing being Palestinian. So people being arrested for what could seem kind of very petty reasons, but in fact are there to kind of silence people. So you've just got this kind of entire ecosystem of repression that is all just a continuation of things that were already going on before the 7th of October, Zionist sovereignty and killing that has intensified but was already ongoing since before the 7th of October. So, you know, you see that kind of affecting every person so obviously it has ramifications for the life and work of everyone including health researchers. Because as well as kind of all of these challenges you've got kind of decades upon decades of communities being ripped apart and that being actually like a very central challenge to effective and engaged and contextually relevant health research and health practice, which has only intensified since the 7th of October as well.

00:06:08 Zeina

Yeah. I mean, what Layth just laid out is like a very good basic level of important—like, understanding the landscape, right? Like without this landscape you can't start talking about things. And within that landscape that you've laid out, I see that one of the ramifications that we have to deal with, whether it be us or other researchers, is this sense of emergency and urgency. And I see them as different things, right? Like I see that the work in emergency mode is something that a lot of times gets pushed and then we realise, well, this is one emergency among a series of emergencies that we get pushed into again and again and again. And there is a lot of urgency of doing work in relation to health and other sectors of life, but the urgency doesn't equal emergency type work. And I think maybe that will take us at some point to what type of research do we—do people do, why, and what does it mean to be working in emergency setting, kind of. Yeah.

00:07:28 Weeam

Yeah. No, and I think that's a really important point. Because, like, working in this context, I think all of us have been working on various aspects of research for a long time, and one of the common threats is sort of this, like, structural uncertainty that's been part of that system for a very long time. But I think also what's unique in a sense—I don't know if the rest will agree. But I think in this particular case, I mean since the genocide in Gaza began, you can tell that, like, initially people were kind of trying to adopt using other, like, modalities of adaptation that they used before or sort of ideas about—or, you know, like thinking about past patterns. Because, you know, like there have been several wars against Gaza in the last decade or so—more than a decade actually, and then the siege. And I think initially people were kind of trying to fit that within those paradigms and trying to sort of think about expectations. Most people I think assumed that it would be very—much shorter than it is now. I don't think any of us really expected that we would still be in this without a clear end in sight. And I think initially it was also that mixed with—because of that fragmentation that Layth talked about, it's also being geographically, if you look at the map very close, but then also just very far, in the sense that you couldn't really do anything that would actually get to the people. And some of us, I think through personal and other contacts, we were trying to be involved in various ways, but structurally I think it was also like difficult. And it created this tension, I think, for a lot of us in terms of even just questioning what the purpose of all of the work is and whether this is actually meaningful or not. Which I

think is a dilemma that we still kind of struggle with. And like Zeina said, there are certain things that feel urgent and important, but then at the same time you're trying to consciously not fall back into other modes of dealing with them that have also proved not to be very effective in the past, but then at the same time balance that with some of the more pertinent things and also push through, or pushed beyond sort of this paralysis that was kind of being imposed in a sense through these various structures.

- 00:09:34 Zeina And that point in itself also, I think in various conversations amongst us we've realised that the situation that we're experiencing has led to also us questioning not only the questions but also the institutions that we work within, and how do we want to relate to these institutions and how do we want to relate even to institutions not within our communities. Because that is also impacting how we're working or how do we want to work.
- 00:10:09 Sohail Thank you so much for that. There are so many questions that come on from what you say, but I think the most—the one which strikes me is this question of: Is research meaningful anymore? Is research meaningful in this particular emergency context? You know, can you work in the same way you worked? How do you adapt? So we have, as part of this series, an episode on qualitative health research in emergency response and thinking about that argument of 'Can research be useful? Can research be immediate? Can research reach the people who need it in a meaningful way?' So I'd be very grateful if you kind of can answer your own question. Can your research continue to be meaningful? What do you have to do to adapt?
- 00:11:01 Zeina Okay. I will start from a place of simplicity. From an example that is from recent work I've been a part of. So, I was recently part of research that I collaborated with Pieter Dronkers from University of Humanistic Studies in the Netherlands, and we were trying to understand dimensions of moral distress experienced by nurses and other health workers at Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem. This research started being implemented in September of 2023, and then October 7th hit. And this specific hospital serves Palestinian community from the West Bank and from Gaza. And I hold a West Bank ID and I'm the main person who's doing the field work and the research on the ground, and I no longer was able to go to Jerusalem. The whole situation on the ground was becoming very different and we're starting to think, "Okay. Again, should this research be done and why would it be done?" And I found myself in the situation of, "I'm just completely unsure." I think at that point I had no idea at all where would things go also. So at the very beginning we paused all work and the question of meaning wasn't even at the forefront. We were just dealing with, "Is there going to be work or not?" [chuckles] And then after maybe a month or so I decided that the only way to think through this is with people at the hospital. So the people who are dealing with the ramifications of what is happening. And I had a very interesting conversation with one of the people who was working there, and this is part of the complexity of things. Is that sometimes we start thinking and the conversation goes to, "Well, if you do research right now it's going to be coloured or impacted by the political situation. So is that okay or not?" And that is the—almost the traditional typical way of thinking of scientific research. That it has to—be objective, it has to be identical to the idea that you had at the very beginning before anything has changed. And I had this conversation with her saying, "Well, I think it is important that we explore what this situation will mean for you guys' work, for the people working in the hospital, for the people that you are working with in the hospital." And so maybe meaning started there, at the very initial level, almost. That's not even meaning at the level of, "What will it mean in general?" What research means. But at the very basic level, it started there.
- 00:14:02 Weeam I mean, I think we had a lot of conversations about work. We had begun—for the last few years we've been trying to do more community-based work, especially in a camp that's near our university. And it had taken a long time to sort of build that relationship and in the summer, we had also completed community health surveys in two camps largely like in cooperation. Where we tried to be as participatory as possible even in the design and even deciding to do a survey to begin with. So there was this work that we had been doing for a while, and then we had decided that we would sort of focus on—

adolescents would be one of our main target areas and we would do work within the schools. That was supposed to start—it was supposed to start pretty early September, and then we had some delays because of just getting through like the bureaucratic loopholes. And then October 7th happened and everything—the—so the schools and universities initially went virtual just because the roads and other things were unsafe. And we had a lot of conversations and I think—and Layth can speak a bit more on the day-to-day, but there were different conversations as to whether we should continue with this work. And the other thing—So I mean, if we think about, let's say, the West Bank specifically, you have direct military occupation, but it's also the way that it's organised both spatially and among certain groups varies quite a bit. And camps in general have been areas that are targeted more intensively by the Israeli military. And this is one of the reasons why we thought it was actually important to work within these contexts, but also to try to do it in a way that is mindful of that context and really—and then try to do it with and through community rather than sort of coming in with a preset idea of what we want to do. Which took a lot more time to just kind of establish that base and establish that trust, and I think at that point we had different conversations. There was an idea that there was a responsibility for us to find ways to continue, especially because of the impacts specifically on these communities. And then the kind of work that we were planning for the schools was also supposed to engage directly with adolescents in a way that centres their own voices and kind of tries to work more on—I don't want to say empowering them [chuckles] because I think that's become also another one of these words that has negative connotations here just given the NGO industry. But trying to just kind of—or centre their own agency and find ways where they're participants in that process. So there was this work with schools and then also there was another project we had going that another colleague was leading, but it was also a part of, that worked with young people with disabilities in that same camp. And what we were hearing from people was that they felt suffocated. And the work that we had started to do, especially with a young group—with a group of young people with disabilities, it was one of the few spaces where they can really kind of express themselves and articulate their experiences and also process their experiences in ways that were not as constricted by the different structural and also social barriers that they faced. And I think that really pushed us to then try to find ways to continue some of that work. And I'm just going to hand it over to Layth here because he was more involved on the ground, because there was a period of time when I was away.

00:17:31 Layth

Yeah. I think that experience kind of in the way that it was also connected to the various relationships that we'd started building kind of almost a year and a half before, actually. You know, it was like about, yeah, like seventeen months of buildup, or sixteen months of buildup to that moment when we started working on a regular basis through concerted efforts with school children. Really, I think, showed me that—what potential value there is to do that kind of work which doesn't kind of engage—you know, we didn't try to go in and, you know, talk to the children about, "Well, this is going to be framed within the settler colonialism that we're living under, or, you know, that, because everyone understands that, you know, kind of instinctively. But just trying to kind of leave a very open space for them to really, yeah, express what their priorities are, what they want to talk about, how they see community health, how they want to engage with it within their very kind of immediate context or within a broader context, and kind of just left it really open. And that, really, for me demonstrated that there is potential value to doing that kind of work, which I think does tie into what Zeina was talking about. So there are obviously all of these kind of very big structures that affect our daily lives in a very real way which are, you know, settler colonialism, which are capitalism, which are whatever. Like all of these various structures are very important but they on their own don't tell us about how individuals are affected, how groups are affected, how groups come together or fall apart as a result. And so there's, I think, real value to doing that kind of work. That's what that experience really showed me. So that's kind of on the very, I guess, small level of doing community health research. But then it always—the question that I always then go back to think about is, "Okay. So how—like, why is that—what kind of research could be important to carry out in a—during a genocide?" And I think that's where, you know, it's important to think about when research is meaningless as well, right? [chuckles] So I think that, you know, that's

an example of kind of quite meaningful research, quite useful research, but I think that there's a lot of useless research that goes on as well. And I think that's the stuff that kind of either is just stuff that's written to be published and nothing else, or stuff that kind of tells us information that, you know, doesn't need to be analysed through any kind of complex methodology. So there was, for example, a paper that tries to analyse whether the occupation forces' actions in Gaza are consistent or in violation of the convention on the rights of the child. And it's just like [chuckles] what—like why on earth should there be an academic paper to discuss what value could that possibly add when there's all of the evidence that's been stacked up? The legal decisions that have already been taken about what this is, as well as just like the very clearly stated intentions and actions of the army that's carrying on or carrying out all of these crimes. I think that's just when it becomes unfathomable that research kind of needs to be written about that. And so it's all—sometimes these really big ideas just fall into complete insignificance when the facts are kind of, you know, laid bare. And I think that is something that, you know, speaks to just that unnecessary bias towards publishing academic papers about absolutely everything [chuckles] when there isn't always a need to, which sometimes is just to completely, I think, reduce all of that. I don't want to be too reductionist about why people write those papers. Sometimes it's people who have been subjected to that violence that want to write those papers, but that's also part of a much more systematic problem with academia but also just hegemonic information sharing and, you know, what—whose testimonies are believed or not, right? That's like a very epistemological thing about people just don't think that they're going to be believed unless there's like a theoretical framework and objective facts that can back up their experience of suffering even if you see their mutilated bodies on your screen. And there's—that's when like it's going to be a losing battle, right? That's not—there are all of these power dynamics within research just as there are within politics and any other structure, that aren't going to be changed with more output. And I think that's kind of some—a trap that we can fall into both with good intentions, but also there's, I think, a lot of stuff that's done in bad faith as well to drag the conversation into some kind of academic debate about whether this is a genocide or not. And I think those are kind of the two levels that I see. There's like the high-level stuff that tries to look at the structures but then ends up actually being quite reductionist and useless and drags us in—like drags our energy in the wrong direction. But then stuff that's kind of very localised and maybe doesn't even engage in those terms around settler colonialism, but intrinsically and implicitly are fully engaged in that context. Obviously there's kind of a myriad of stuff in between but those are the kind of two extremes.

00:22:33 Sohail

I kind of wanted to pick up on, again, many points that you guys mentioned. I appreciate particularly the point on this perhaps almost compulsion of academics to, "We have to publish." I mean, it's a lot of the time what our success or not is based on, and I think it's—the very first episode of this series was on academic publishing on the journal system and how things might be a bit broken and things might not actually—we might not be producing the knowledge we need to produce and sharing it in the way that we need to share it. So I very much appreciate that point. I kind of wanted to build on it a bit and ask, do you feel like there is perhaps—I would say for instance, so coming from a research background of—You know, I work with people seeking sanctuary a lot of the time. There is for sure a streak of researcher exploitation, I think, in terms of like what you said, publishing for the sake of publishing, perhaps also in the way people work with people in the way that stories are perhaps taken and almost stolen. So I kind of wanted to ask you, do you feel like there is that element to some of the ongoing research? Do you think it's gotten worse recently or it's just part of a longer-term trend?

00:23:55 Weeam

[chuckles] I mean, I think that's a really important question. And I think also just, you know, hearing from older colleagues who have been doing this for much longer, there have been different phases. I think what's maybe a little bit different during this particular period is that, you know, in the lead up there's been a lot more work around like decolonising, there's been a lot—more work about that kind of critical scholarship given different names. And I think we've had a lot of different conversations. We've also noted some of these sort of generational differences. Maybe the short answer is I think it has been consistently there to varying degrees, but I think in the past people

were more willing in some ways. Even if they didn't necessarily like it, they were more willing to kind of accept it in a pragmatic sense in some ways. Because it was, "At least the stories are getting out there." And I think we need to understand this in relation to the dehumanisation of Palestinians over decades, where, you know, then you kind of get to a point where people are just happy to have something being spoken. And you see that shift and we see it even with the younger generation that's actually refusing a lot of these frameworks that used to be fairly common or were thought to be like an advancement at a different point in history. And I think that's normal in any sort of context and they all build on each other. Because—it's because of the work of these older colleagues that we're able to kind of do the work that we're doing now, and I think it's important to acknowledge that. It's not to diminish what used to be done. And I think if we look at most of our disciplines or the disciplines we've been trained in, a lot of them do have these colonial legacies. Like a lot of them were also [chuckles]—you know, all of them if not most of them. And so it was in the service of something and I think we forget that now, because we feel like we're further removed or some of these fields are now thought to be more progressive than others. So I don't—so I think in that sense, the story in Palestine is not unique in that sense. It's something that happens in other places. [sighs] But I think for—you do see some of that, I think, less so in some ways, just because scholars are different. Not because people don't try or make that assumption, but I think because you have people who are refusing to be part of that system and more and more people who are refusing and actually sort of setting the terms of engagement in ways that maybe they weren't before for all sorts of reasons. And again, I don't think there are reasons that reflect poorly on the individuals that were doing the research before, but it was just kind of because they were just under a lot more systemic and structural barriers than maybe we deal with at times. So in some ways, but then you do face other kinds of problems. And I think—for example, I mean Layth touched upon this idea of publishing, and what we've seen in the last like nine months—I mean, we've seen this constantly. Like I remember one of my mentors and colleagues, a professor of economics, she said like before when she would keep trying to submit papers for publication before 2000, anything that was related to Palestine, and she would get letters back from editors saying, "Oh, this is political, why are you sending it to a scientific journal?" Whereas like that wasn't the same thing with like, for example, Israeli scholarship. So there has been a shift in that sense. You see more being published and more being published by Palestinians. But then we're—like, just since October, like we've had a few pieces, sometimes like commentaries and other things, that we've tried to get published where then it's going through additional, like, legal scrutiny that delays publication for five months, and with a commentary sometimes it's time sensitive to something. And I think a lot of people have faced this. There's been maybe more explicit censorship around certain concepts that may be—like that where there's been scholarship for at least two decades using those very same concepts. And so there is this exceptionalism in a way and things are classified as sensitive only if they're talking about Palestine or Palestinians, even if the content itself may not necessarily be sensitive. So I think you do see it more in that sense, but at the same time you do see, at least in my opinion, I think there are more scholars who are refusing to play that game. And given sort of the more global push, like, especially in global health, like especially in the more progressive segments at least, I think there's been—some of those spaces have been created and people have also sort of been refusing them to agree to the censorship required to publish in big journals and then publish in other platforms or forums. So you do see more of that, and I think that you do see more explicit resistance to that push. But I think the push has been there and it's gotten stronger since October to censor, but people are finding workarounds a lot of the times.

00:28:55 Layth

I think that I definitely see that as well among particularly Palestinian scholars and allies. There's an added layer, I think, which adds or kind of maybe reinforces or perpetuates the problematic nature of the publishing as well, which is I think kind of the more opportunistic elements of the academic world and humanitarian world. Where because of how big the events are and how engaged people are in them, I think most journals have realised that even if they weren't willing to publish anything on Palestine before, that they need to in order to maintain their readership and pacify their readership that needs to read about this. And you see people who wouldn't have

engaged in Palestine before at all, because it was considered a taboo and they would just go along with the fact that it's taboo, finally started talking about Palestine and talk about it in exactly the way that the kind of—you know, these very kind of liberal establishments want them to talk about it. So these kind of classic humanitarians who subscribed to the ideas of medical neutrality, but only when it works against the oppressed and in favour of the—those who are the oppressors talk about Palestine. But, you know, either—not—quite often not saying—not naming the aggressor or not naming the victims or talking in very kind of rights-based language and never in kind of the language that we insist on using around justice, around liberation. Not put things in the long term context and just put things within crises framings and things like that. You see that opportunism which, you know, has been reflected in essentially all major journals which, yeah, very interestingly, if you look at the history of any of those writers, or most of those writers, they wouldn't have talked about Palestine before because they would—they fully subscribed to whatever hegemonic ideas are salient any one point.

00:30:55 Zeina

Can I add just one thing? Because I feel sometimes I'm a person who is not fully an academic. My engagement with the publication world has changed and I think in the past few years I've thought about we—you asked the question of like, "How meaningful is research at this time?" I also think about how meaningful is publishing for the sake of publishing, which we've been talking about. But I think it's important to think, "Who are we publishing for?" Right? "Like, what audience do we want to publish for and for what purpose?" And this is something that I've—I think we all think about and one of the things, even before this period, was, for example, the fact that as we teach one of the major dilemmas that we fall into is that there aren't enough publications in Arabic for Arab speaking students who we teach and we want to have access to the research that we do about Palestine. So Palestinians doing research about Palestine, wanting to have this be accessible to our people becomes more difficult when we also have to chase the publication policies and dynamics and politics. So to me, I think also this is a moment where how we share research about Palestine is a good moment to think about it. Whether it be now or even before. And publishing more in Arabic and publishing not solely in known journals is something that is important. So that is one angle which I don't feel gets enough attention.

00:32:45 Weeam

And I think that's a really important point I just wanted to touch on. Because I think for a very long time, and you see this even—I think even in the way that you see sort of people in Gaza, like Palestinians and Gaza, going on social media and talking about what they're going through. And I think one thing that gets overlooked is, as Palestinians for a very long time we've learned that we need to make ourselves legible to other people and to the outside world. Because there's this idea that once they understand, once you're legible, once they can understand you, once you speak their language, that might make—convince them that your life is worthy of being treated as other human beings and all this stuff. And I think there is this undercurrent, and I think that was also part of kind of what I was referring to before, as like there was this generation that was just happy to get a seat on the table and to have even the word Palestine be mentioned in prestigious journals or others. Like it was considered to be an accomplishment. And I'm—again, I'm not diminishing from that and I think that, you know, they're stepping stones. But I think it also reflects that inequality and it reflects sort of the sense where when you are of the establishment and, you know, like if you're Israeli, let's say—let's make it explicit in this case—you're not really having to worry about making yourself legible to other people. Because there's this presumption that people already know. Like you don't need to prove it. And I think in some ways, like especially now with social media, this is sort of why I think it's maybe now we're seeing kind of it hurting public opinion in a way that maybe it didn't in the past just given those sorts of things. But it also just—because very rarely does the more hegemonic group have to then make itself legible, because the assumption is that it is legible and accessible to everybody else. And I think—and then also just given—like within our university—and Zeina's point, it's really important in that sense, if you want to get promoted you need to publish in journals that are established and very few of them are in Arabic if—and I think now there may be a few, but very, very rarely. But it also means that especially in the social sciences that are still largely taught in Arabic, for example,

your students can't access that research unless they speak English well enough to be able to access that information; like to access the papers and read them and all this stuff. And this is something that I think we've sort of been struggling with. And then oftentimes because of the lack of graduate programs and this internalisation of, "Which programs are better than others?" You're kind of pushed to then be trained outside of Gaza and especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, whether it's North America or like the UK. And so then you're trained abroad and you're coming back and then having to sometimes translate some of these concepts or figure these things out. But then it also becomes harder for you to then write and publish in your own native tongue.

00:35:48 Zeina

Yeah.

00:35:49 Weeam

And it's also not something that necessarily gets credit. Like you're almost penalised for it within the promotion and tenure system. So I think all of these things are also there. [chuckles] I feel like I kind of went a bit....

00:36:02 Zeina

No. But I think that's given the moment that we're in, given the questions that we are trying to grapple with, I think the moment that we're in has made us really focus not solely on the current emergency and how we respond to it, but what we are trying to say is that we're trying to also look beyond this moment to say, "There are certain things that we want to not continue falling into or there are certain patterns that there's no need to continue doing." And this is what you're saying. Is that this is something that has been tried by scholars and researchers and we've seen that it's been useful to a miniscule degree but do we want to keep doing it in the same fashion or is it time to do things in a different way that is meaningful. Not to get a name or not to get just a seat on a table or to gain legitimacy, but to also feel that the meaningfulness is for our communities.

00:37:08 Layth

Exactly. Because it's about—yeah, it's about exactly that question of what meaning you actually want out of your work, right? Is it—do you want to fit into the establishments that kind of, you know, are already hegemonic or do you recognise that it's precisely those establishments in the organisation of power within them that have led to our dehumanisation? That have led to the denial of our right to resist and to our, you know, denial of freedom, of the right to liberation, justice, et cetera? In which case, yeah, why would I publish in English? Because actually all of those institutions speak in English and then, you know, you start learning more kind of Global South languages and you start trying to engage with liberatory forms of knowledge production not just dissemination, right?

00:37:56 Zeina

Yeah.

00:37:56 Layth

So actually like you just start to think about how to upend and create alternative systems effectively. That's where you get to, is trying to just create completely a different world instead of trying to do well within the one that has led to our subjugation.

00:38:13 Zeina

True. But I want to be just a bit of a devil's advocate, because I remember something that you did and I think is brilliant. I think there is also importance in sharing how we challenge certain ideas. Not solely amongst ourselves, but also with people who are willing to learn and not want to just teach us, right? And I'm thinking now of, I think, the medicine students that you had a workshop with in the UK.

00:38:44 Layth

Yeah. So this is....

00:38:46 Zeina

Sometimes like collaboration—

00:38:47 Layth

Exactly.

00:38:48 Zeina

—is something that not thinking through, "Okay. What are the tools that get me ahead in my profession?" But, "How do I want to collaborate with others to think through

certain dilemmas in knowledge, in epistemology, in health, in working together to improve our communities?”

00:39:07 Layth Yeah, absolutely. And this is something that’s....

00:39:10 Sohail Just can you tell us a bit more about that workshop?

00:39:14 Layth Yeah, of course. I’m going to specifically name who this was with as well, because I think they’re brilliant. And they’re UK based in case the podcast audience are mainly UK based. It’s Centric Lab who had put on this many-week long course with kind of eight or nine different sessions in which they were trying to bring across or think together about or try to present analysis to health professionals and health students of the way in which hegemonic ideas in health are based in coloniality, are in service of imperialism as the kind of, you know, first part. And then the middle part, which is the one that I was part of, was after, you know, some of that had been dissected trying to think about what methods of resistance had been enacted and tried around the world. So one of the examples was the Palestinian example, and so trying to fit together that critique of coloniality within health systems and colonialism in health systems, to how—what—how resistance within health may look like. And then finally build from that in the final part of the—of this course, trying to think about—think through and think together about how to build indigenous health systems and indigenous knowledge systems in health. This was a UK-based initiative and these were UK-based health students and health professionals. So, you know, in the—from the belly of the beast but who were coming together, I think, based on that understanding that there’s something wrong with the way that they were taught and the way that they were practicing and—but then engaged on a global level with partners who could dissect that and then try to rebuild the pieces into something that’s kind of much more liberatory in its philosophy. So, yeah, I mean, this is exactly one of them. And, you know, I think there are many other examples, ones that have been going on for a long time. So the other one that comes to mind is the People’s Health Movement, for example, and in all of its kind of various constituent parts that for very long time, you know, for thirty-four years of People’s Health Movement, but then decades earlier of the constituent parts of People’s Health Movement, is based essentially on networking between health activists that have liberation in mind when it comes to their health practice. And I think that those are exactly—you know, I was lucky enough and privileged enough to be part of both of those spaces recently and The People’s Health Assembly in Argentina when—yeah, I mean, it was a week of not having to explain why imperialism is bad. It was so refreshing. [chuckles] And those spaces do exist and those are exactly the spaces that I think we need to build, but they’re not—they’re obviously on the margins but that’s okay. In fact, that’s important. [chuckles]

00:42:27 Zeina I mean, yeah. But also I think I’m hearing the—for me, it’s important how we build partnerships, right?

00:42:36 Layth Mhm.

00:42:37 Zeina And what do partnerships that are not always completely from our community, what our partners will do? Right? So we’ve been saying how we need to be selective or we have to be careful. Most recently when I did this collaboration with Pieter Dronkers this is something that I noticed. Is that I had someone that I’m cooperating with who understands that we cannot keep—and this is way less radical than people who are activists in the field of health. This is something—someone who has been interested in Palestine but has been doing work in the Netherlands mainly on care ethics, and now is working again in Palestine after years in—outside of academia and then back in academia. And what I respected, what felt also essential and I will take it with me onwards, is that this is someone who understands that when things go awry because of the political situation and reality that I’m living, and we are living, there needs to be adaptations. There needs to be a change in the plan. There needs to be also a reason for the people that we are working with, or the hospital that I’m working with, to feel like there is a reason why they should collaborate with us. In this sense, for example, it was very, very, very simple; an advocacy report. This is for them a tool that they can

use rather than doing research for the sake of our interests, right? As researchers. But they can use that advocacy report in the way that they feel is useful for them. So this advocacy report went through sessions of editing and back and forth with the hospital because it's for their needs. So sometimes it's—it can be really simple, but it's so important.

00:44:38 Weeam And I think that touches also on the issue of accountability and who we're accountable to as researchers. And oftentimes the people that are taking part in research, like very rarely do they even see the final product. And you were asking earlier about, "Are there ideas then being taken and all this stuff?" And I think there is a responsibility for researchers who are committed to doing research ethically to also think about that kind of accountability.

00:45:03 Zeina Yeah.

00:45:03 Weeam And then also to have that flexibility, which, you know, I think there is more openness too now. But—and then I think also to Layth's point, one of the trends that I've been seeing more of is, there has just been a more conscious refusal to engage with researchers or humanitarian aid organisations or others whose starting point is not already that Palestinians are human, for example. Like where you're still kind of having to do that work to prove your humanity. People are—I think, more and more people are consciously making the decision, "This is no longer my job. If this bare minimum starting point is not one that you're already at and I have to do the work to convince you that I'm worthy of even being spoken to as a human being, I'm not interested in engaging and my efforts are better put elsewhere." And I think that is a positive trend. And I think also just the way that we've been thinking about research has shifted a lot over the last few decades, especially with more progressive currents that help us even create that space and make those arguments without necessarily falling into the same useless debate about—that you used to see about qualitative or quantitative or what's objective and what isn't objective. Like these are just—it's not even worth continuing these debates and I think you just decide to have a different starting point. The Palestine Program for Health and Human Rights, when we were thinking about starting this program, we made a decision that this program will only exist as a partnership between ICPH and the FXB Centre but it can't be a Harvard program that Palestinians sort of engage with. And luckily there was somebody there that—you know, and there have been people that supported it and that have made it possible, even though I think we've—anybody doing Palestine work has also had their share of dealing with attacks. But it's—it takes a certain kind of commitment, but it's also—I can probably say [chuckles] this on behalf—for all three of us, we are not willing to engage with people who don't already have that commitment—

00:47:01 Zeina Yeah.

00:47:02 Layth Mhm.

00:47:02 Weeam —because it's kind of a futile exercise at this point.

00:47:04 Zeina Yeah.

00:47:06 Sohail Brilliant. Thank you so much for that really nuanced discussion. I kind of, unfortunately, have to move us on to the last question of the podcast. And I kind of want to build on some of what you said at the end, Weeam, about I guess you were looking forward a bit. You were looking towards what—where and how you want to engage and who—you know, what's the starting point? And I wanted to ask, what do you think is the future of a long-term—it's a very hard question to ask obviously, but for Palestinian health research and health researchers, what do you think the future is? And I think we kind of mentioned it a little at the beginning, but obviously infrastructurally there has been a quite significant impact in terms of the destruction of universities in Gaza, but also there has been, as you guys very eloquently described, a lot of other hurdles and barriers that people and researchers in different areas of Palestine in Jerusalem, in the West Bank, in the '48—in 1948 'Occupy Palestine' have to combat. So I kind of wanted

to—how do you—what’s the future? Have things changed completely? Are things—you know, are things going to be able to continue? Do things have to adapt quite substantially?

00:48:42 Weeam

I think like any other time we’re going to see very contradictory forces existing simultaneously. Because—and I think especially with Gaza, my prediction at least is in the immediate period there’s going to be, again, this emphasis on emergency humanitarianism oftentimes decontextualised and a devoid of that. And I think that current will happen. Yeah. But I think there are also—there is a growing sort of group of people doing research that is more critical of, like we discussed before, sort of these spaces that have been created especially among—I mean, and a lot of these have been led by students too—and I think it’s important to acknowledge that—of demanding a different mode of engagement. And I think that kind of work will also continue and I think there are going to be more people who are—what I would like to see at least as sort of the future of that is research that is committed like politically, like where you are committed to justice sort of as a starting point and where you’re not having to then go into these endless debates about whether that makes you less credible as a researcher or not. Because I think we’re beyond that at this point. And I think also [sighs] what I would personally like to see is also research that really does centre community and centres the voices of those who are actually experiencing what it is that we’re interested in. And there’s been a lot of this work and, again, like for example in critical disability studies you’ve seen a lot of that work in terms of really kind of including people with that lived experience. I know even like at King’s, like Hannah Kinsler and others have been doing kind of this work also with migrants and asylum seekers. Really trying to centre the voices of people with the lived experience, and I would like to see more of that across even methodological bounds. Because—I mean, even in the more quantitative work that we’ve done, like the survey and all this other stuff, even the design, things really did shift. And there were insights that we were able to integrate very early on in the design because of that engagement with community that actually made it more informative than if we had just taken a standardised, ‘validated’—and here I would use air quotes on validated—instruments because—from a different context and just sort of applied it as is without any sort of contextualisation. So I think that, for me, I would like to see a future where more of that contextualised work becomes the norm rather than more limited to progressive spaces.

00:51:22 Layth

I would add to that, that there’s a responsibility to call out the vested interests in the other way that things are done, right? So the—a lot of the struggle around centring community voices is, well, either they’re kind of, you know, inexperienced and/or kind of non-experts, which, you know—[chuckles] I’ll leave aside, or something about the vested interest. So sometimes it’s, you know, if you’ve got a particular stance towards something, if you’ve got an ideological dispossession in a certain way, then that somehow discredits you because of a vested interest. But then we also—if we’re going to do that I think we need to be really much more explicit in calling out the vested interest for, for example, the humanitarian industry. The humanitarian industrial complex that goes in after every crisis and decontextualises it and depoliticises it. And I think that because—I hope that if it wasn’t clear before that there is a moment of clarity that there is something really sinister behind depoliticising very political things. Which is not just, you know, in Palestine, but I think across the entire world, right? When we talk about the whole idea of migration in the UK, for example, it’s, “Oh, it’s a strain on resources.” Even if you talk about debt in the UK, it’s this really technical debate that you’re forced into. Into something that’s actually at its base very ideological. So actually, you know, becoming much more brave and saying, “Well, yeah, I actually want—I want to hear from the people who’ve got a vested interest in not living in poverty or not subjecting people to poverty.” Should be a positive thing not a negative thing. I think, you know, that’s something that we need to kind of just become a lot braver as researchers in stating kind of from the start of, “Yes, our assumption is that in the same way that there’s a financial cost, we need to think about the human cost,” and just kind of—just being really clear about those conversations. But I think that, you know, if we’re trying to predict the future, I think that’s going to be—that’s going to continue to be a struggle. Because, you know, those forces are hegemonic for a reason and it’s because they are embedded in—within financial systems, within

economic systems, within social and cultural systems, which inevitably also all build the academic world and all build all of these institutions. So I think, you know, worst case scenario is business as usual or things getting worse, right? And best-case scenario is more people realising this and putting that power behind these kind of much more justice oriented practices and theories. And it could go both ways and the genocide could—this isn't, you know—this is there is an ongoing genocide. It could be successful. Like I think we just—we also just need to be honest about that fear as well, of the genocide could be successful. We could be wiped out. Like that's—those things, I think, also just need to be laid out because the stakes are really important to also be clear about and, yeah. So that would be, yeah, it could go anyway and so I think that's why it's very important to just be very clear on, "Okay. What are your assumptions?" Whether as a researcher or a practitioner or a just an everyday person.

- 00:54:32 Zeina I think you've covered it all. I hope that we will have people who are more justice oriented. I like that in terms of also collaborations, whether it be on the academic or other fields of collaboration, right? That will help a lot in jumping over hurdles in terms of what we want to do in the future.
- 00:54:55 Sohail Brilliant. Well, I want to thank you very, very much for your time and for the depth of thoughts. And, yeah, very much appreciated. It was a real treat to not have to ask so many questions because you guys just ask questions to each other and prompted each other, so that was really beautiful. So thanks very much. Thank you to our listeners. We should be transcribing this podcast and also translating it into Arabic, so you can access that in several ways. And really looking forward to the rest of the series. We've got a lot more coming up, so please do stay tuned to that, and thanks very much. Thanks all.
- 00:55:38 Layth Thank you.
- 00:55:39 Zeina Thank you.
- 00:55:40 Layth Thank you so much.
- [End of recording]