

Ethical challenges in participatory projects: case study discussions

The case study

Power, ownership and control – when we give young people a platform how prepared are we to listen to what they have to say?

Background and context

Issues of power and control and the limits of these are present in many participatory research projects and, particularly when working on projects with multiple stakeholders, it can be hard to get the balance right. This case study explores how these issues emerged in a large-scale, two-year research project that worked with over 100 young people to amplify and make space for their voices on issues including sex, relationships and violence.

The project was funded by a large, national organisation and involved projects and young people from across the UK. Alongside the 1:1 interviews with both young people and practitioners, small groups of young people worked together to create films exploring the issues being researched. These films were linked to but independent of the research project. This process was presented as an opportunity for young people to take control and think about how to represent issues of sexual violence to others.

What parameters were set?

Attempts were made to be transparent about ownership and control over these films. The young people involved in making the films were told from the beginning that their work was part of a bigger project and that there were multiple stakeholders involved. They were also told that the content of their films could be censored if local project staff felt that it posed a safeguarding risk for individuals or communities.

The ethical challenge

Following the development of the concept and shooting of the films, these were then shown to the wider research team and the funder. Concerns were raised that some of the content in the films posed certain risks to young people. One scene in particular was seen to pose a risk to the safety of a young child in the film, despite the belief of local project staff that this was not the case, and consequently the young person involved was asked to re-shoot sections of the film. Another scene contained content that was seen to pose a risk to other young people due to messaging that was perceived to perpetuate negative stereotypes, something the research was trying to mitigate. Due to the feedback this scene was slightly adapted to make the messaging less prominent, but the

content was unchanged, leaving some of the researchers with anxiety about how the messages would be perceived by other young people.

Questions for reflection

- How do we effectively manage young people's expectations in situations like this?
- How do we work with conflict when this emerges during participation work?
- Young people's voices can sometimes make us feel uncomfortable – how do we prepare for this? To what extent should we steer and guide young people in how they say things (when presenting for example)?
- How do we support young people fully and also adequately share control?

Summary of the online discussion that took place on the 28th June 2017

There was broad agreement that these are the kind of issues practitioners and researchers are often faced with when doing participatory work and that there aren't any easy answers! Through the discussion a number of ideas and examples were shared relating to how to address some of these tensions:

- How do we effectively manage young people's expectations in situations like this and share control?
 - Preparation work is really important – making sure that you are really clear and transparent about the limits of control that young people have in different situations
 - You can't prepare for everything, and this kind of work is a constant learning process
- How do we help young people to make decisions about what information they want to share and be safe without overruling or taking control?
 - Open, honest dialogue is really important
 - Issues of anonymity are central– there are lots of creative ways of sharing information without putting young people at risk
 - There is a balance between helping young people think through what they want to share and what the implications of this are, and not censoring young people
- How do we work with conflict when this emerges during participation work?
 - Conflict is not necessarily bad – and can be helpful to move things forward and challenge our thinking
 - It is impossible to please everyone!
 - Sometimes as practitioners/researchers we have to sit with conflict and this is ok
- Young people's voices can sometimes make us feel uncomfortable – how do we prepare for this? To what extent should we steer and guide young people in how they say things (when presenting for example)?
 - How prepared are we as practitioners or as researchers to hear and sit with viewpoints that contradict our own? This is something really important to think about
 - Practitioners need to examine where their anxieties come from – open dialogue is really important
 - Young people have really important and powerful things to say, and it's important not to dilute these

- It's also important to support young people to think through what the impact of what they are saying might have on others – important to consider the audience this goes to – are there much younger children for example for whom some content would not be appropriate?
 - Sometimes anxiety can be used to start a helpful conversation about what it is that makes us feel uncomfortable
 - It's important to think about this in a more positive way – it's not closing young people down, but thinking about opportunities that can come from certain situations and what other people can learn from young people sharing their opinions
 - If you ask young people to tell you what they think about something (a report for example) then sometimes the feedback might not be what you want, but this is important too. And those acting as the 'go between' shouldn't feel the need to 'dilute' young people's feedback and 'protect' other professionals
- How do we support young people fully and also adequately share control?
 - It's important to think about these issues in advance – particularly if they might impact on other young people
 - Often however we don't recognise this until the end
 - Creating things/sharing opinions can be a very healing process, but practitioners need to be able to hold this. Need to help young people think about where they want their information to go
 - Consent forms that start a discussion and don't just tick a box are helpful = consent as an on-going process

Other key points:

- Young people have lots of things they want to do and might not always want to feedback on the same sorts of things. Particularly when working with some 'groups' of young people it's important that organisations don't exploit their specialist knowledge and not give anything back. There is a need to think about who benefits from a young person taking part – is it the young person or the organisation?
- A 'request form' system might be helpful - asking organisations why they want to engage with young people, what will happen with the information, and what the benefits will be for young people. This can then be taken to the young people to discuss. It formalises requests and means that the young people can accept those that are really well thought out
- Practitioners can play an important role in helping young people to make decisions about how they want to be involved and what they want to be involved in – supporting young people to make decisions rather than taking them away
- Being really clear with partners from the outset is important – not everyone has the same views/ethical standards so it is important to clarify the details in advance