

Ethical issues in qualitative research addressing sensitive issues with children and young people

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Abstract

This chapter maps ethical issues which arise in conducting qualitative research into sensitive issues – such as sexuality – with children and young people under eighteen years of age. Our purpose is to provide information for researchers in the field and members of Ethics Committees who evaluate proposals in this area. We begin by defending the use of qualitative research with young people to study sensitive issues. Within the research community, increasing importance is being placed on the opinions and perspectives of those under eighteen, which qualitative research is well placed to record. Understanding young people as active makers of meaning – including as active research participants – lessens the concern that they must be ‘protected’ from information and instead points us towards ethics as the most important framework for managing this research. There are, of course, a number of particular ethical concerns confronting researchers undertaking research about sexuality with young people. We identify two important approaches to addressing these concerns: creating safe spaces for young people to participate, and the use of reflexive research methods.

Introduction

This chapter is written for researchers who are preparing to conduct qualitative research with young people about sensitive topics such as

sexuality and members of Ethics Committees who must evaluate proposals for such research. Research institutions routinely require researchers to seek permission from an Ethics Committee or similar body before they can undertake research with human subjects. The history of the evolution of Ethics regimes in their current form places a strong emphasis on biomedical approaches to ethics – which commonly favour quantitative research methods. This has led to criticisms that formal ethical provisions for qualitative researchers are inadequate because they have been ‘generalised far beyond the context in which they were formulated’ (Gallagher 2009, 13). This is particularly so when the standards for what constitutes ‘useful’ research can differ markedly between disciplines. For instance, qualitative research methods can provide data that is equally – and, for some purposes, even more – valuable as that produced using quantitative approaches. This is the case even – and perhaps particularly – when the research in question is studying young people, and addressing sensitive issues such as sexuality.

While there is a strong and varied tradition of academic research into this issue (including the authors we discuss in this chapter), it has not been made available in a form that is useful for academics preparing to conduct qualitative research with young people into sensitive issues, nor with those academics who sit on those committees and may be required to make judgments on projects whose methods are far removed from their own training. For this reason, we outline best practice research ethics and methods for qualitative research into sensitive issues with young people under or eighteen years of age. Under the label of sensitive issues we include topics such as sexuality, bullying, suicidal ideation and drug use. These are topics where ‘commonsense’ public discourses about children’s ‘innocence’ and assumed vulnerability render research that listens to young people’s views controversial. Nevertheless, recent trends in academic writing, as we show in this chapter, insist that it is important to listen to young people’s perspectives on these issues, and to allow them to contribute to the process of making sense of these aspects of their lives. In this article we take the case study of sexuality, and how young people’s perspectives on this topic might ethically

be researched, to illustrate the complexity of these issues. We hope that this article will be of practical use for everyone who engages with the ethics processes of research institutions in relation to these issues.

‘Young people’, agency and research

Social attitudes towards children and young people are closely linked to the way they are approached in research and research ethics (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Greig and Taylor 1999, 3). Traditional conceptions of young people in ethics procedures have understood them to be ‘developing adults’. That is, in their developing state, young people were seen to be fundamentally vulnerable research subjects, lacking the communicative and cognitive abilities to participate properly in research (see Birbeck and Drummond 2007, p, 26).¹ Childhood was understood as a knowable, biological state of being best observed through quantitative methods in laboratory settings (see Graue and Wash 1998, 3). Young people were ‘objects’ that research was performed on or done ‘to’, sometimes resulting in ‘guinea pig’ studies that severely compromised their rights (for examples of studies that took this approach in the twentieth century see Lederer and Grodin 1994, pp. 9-11).

A related research framework saw young people as ‘innocent’ or weak and therefore in need of protection in research (see Sime 2008, 67). While researchers who favoured a ‘development’ paradigm took a dim view of young people’s capacities, researchers who favoured a model of young people as ‘innocent’ were doubtful about their resilience. For both these reasons it was common practice to bypass young people altogether in research that concerned them, particularly about sensitive issues such as sexuality, instead asking adult proxies to report on young people’s experiences and opinions.

¹ The notion that children are incomplete can be seen in Jean Piaget’s theory of intellectual development and Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral development – see Birbeck and Drummon, 2007, p. 23.

This is the simplest approach to the issue of research ethics with young people. There might appear to be no ethical issues raised in ‘protecting’ young people from sensitive issues by not even raising those issues with them. However, over the past two decades researchers have increasingly argued that there are in fact problems with this approach (Powell and Smith, 2009, Graham and Fitzgerald 2010, Robinson and Davies 2014) and that it may even be regarded as unethical to silence young people’s contribution to research that concerns them. Clearly, excluding the views of young people weakens the depth and breadth of research findings in the field.

There exists no international agreement about the definition of a ‘child’ or ‘young person’. The definition varies on the basis of legislation, common law and public policy frameworks. These frameworks underpin cultural discourses about the boundaries between childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Depending on the national and institutional context, a ‘young person’ can range from birth to twenty five years old. In Australia, for example, a person under the age of eighteen years of age is defined as a child in all states and territories except in South Australia and in some legislation in NSW (Bessant 2006, 52). This means that a seventeen-year-old’s status as a ‘young person’ – and thus their perceived capacity to participate in research – can vary as they cross state borders. In this article we therefore use the term ‘young person’ to refer to participants up to the age of eighteen years old, allowing nineteen year-olds to be counted as adults for the purposes of research ethics. In other contexts, however, a nineteen-year old would still be regarded as a young person, and could thus be caught up in protocols which denied her the right to contribute to research that concerns her.

Recognizing that the category of ‘young person’ is a cultural and legal mode of classification that shifts between contexts, rather than a simple biological fact, frames our ways of thinking about the characteristics of ‘young people’. Over the past twenty years, interdisciplinary work under the umbrellas of Childhood Studies and Youth Studies has begun to present a very different

picture of who 'young people' are in ways that have important implications for research methods and ethics for exploring sensitive issues. Childhood and adolescence are now, and indeed have for some time been understood as socially constructed, not biologically predetermined (see [Ariès](#) 1962; Qvortrup 1994; James and Prout 1997, 1998). Recognition of the social context of childhood has been accompanied by an understanding that 'childhood' is not a universal or homogenous experience. Influential academic researchers have laid the groundwork for understanding young people's agency and have argued that young people are able to make sense of their own experience and articulate it given the right environment and tools (see Duits and van Zoonen 2006; see also Matthews 2005; Alderson and Morrow 2004, 2011).

Researchers taking this approach have critiqued the notion that young people are undeveloped and incompetent to express their views, and argued that they should have agency in contributing to how they are understood by the adult world (Christensen and James 2008, 5, James 2007, Lewis 2010). The "Ethical Research Involves Children" (ERIC) resource (<http://childethics.com/>) has brought together researchers working with children and young people to identify best practice in the area. As Mary Powell, Robyn Fitzgerald, Nicola Taylor and Anne Graham (2012) note, the critical issue of young people's voices and the ways they are represented are recurring themes in the literature.

This revised understanding of young people and their agency has been cemented by the recognition that children have human rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) recognized the civil, cultural, economic, political, cultural and social rights of those under eighteen years of age and has become the most widely ratified human rights convention. Of particular relevance for researchers are Articles 12(1) and 13(1), which stipulate that young people have the right to express their opinions on matters that affect them and the right to be heard. The 2002 UN Special Session on Children reaffirmed the international community's focus on human rights for young people, including their right to be actively involved with all stages of decision making that concern them.

This international commitment is reflected in research that explores the human rights edict that young people have complex human rights and should not be treated as different from adult humans. Michael Ignatieff (2000,108) notes that young people 'have the right not just to be sheltered and cared for and protected from abuse, but also to be treated as moral agents in their own right.' The NHMRC's Australian *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007), the standard document on ethical practice in Australiastipulates that, 'researchers must respect the developing capacity of children and young people to be involved in decisions about their participation in research'.² Indeed, young people are now widely viewed by researchers as 'subjects' rather than objects in the research process (Tisdall 2009, 1). In their comprehensive literature review, Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor and Graham show how recent developments in Childhood Studies and Youth Studies have enabled a change in the values and beliefs of researchers working with young people, including the growing focus on situating young people as 'co-researchers'. This view not only impacts on what sorts of research is carried out, in terms of the projects' focus on what young people think and experience, but also on *how* it is carried out. As Emma Clavering and Janice MacLaughlin (cited in Powell et al 2012) note, in research practice there is a broad scope to create new research which results in approaches that focus *on* research rather than *on* young people. It is critical that we document and evaluate participatory approaches that enable young people's opinions to inform both the process and outcomes of research (see Bell 2008, 7).

The changing theoretical discourses about young people, and what it means to be young, have challenged existing categories of 'child', 'adolescent', 'youth' and 'adult', making the value of determining a young person's

² Young people's participation and protection in research is also reinforced by domestic legislation, which includes background checks on those who work with young people. In NSW, *The Children and Young Person's (Care and Protection) Act 1998* requires those working with young people to provide for their safety and wellbeing. The participation principle (s9b) stipulates that 'wherever a child or young person is able to form a view on matters concerning their safety, welfare and wellbeing, they must be given an opportunity to express these views freely'.

intellectual, social or ethical competence by reference to their age debatable (Bessant 2006). Debates around ethical issues of consent and participation often treat young people as an undifferentiated and homogeneous group. More recently, researchers problematizing concepts of 'being' a child, or 'becoming' an adult (Uprichard 2008, Balen 2006) have argued for a theorization of young people as 'beings and becomings' (ibid 2008, 303). This approach addresses the temporality of childhood, framing it as something young people themselves are able to give voice to, whilst also aiming for a more conceptually realistic representation that is deemed suitable by those working in the field (ibid).

These definitions have implications for questions about who should be allowed to speak in research that concerns young people. Taking the sensitive issue of sexuality as an example, Kerry Robinson (2012) raises the issue of 'difficult citizenship' when thinking about the representation of young people's sexuality, young people as sexual subjects, and the sexual norms to which young people are subjected. Like Robinson, we argue that values, identity, bodies, behaviours, and sexual health and wellbeing are relevant to young people themselves. Any articulation or exploration of young people's lives must consider the 'prevailing relations of power that constitute who they are as subjects' (Robinson 2012, 271). For example, in Australian State and Territory law, young people are acknowledged as having capacity to consent to medical procedures from the age of fourteen, and to body-to-body sexual interaction at age sixteen or seventeen (Albury, Crawford, Matthews and Byron 2013). Despite these legal acknowledgements of young people's bodily autonomy with respect to medical and sexual activities they are not afforded the legal capacity to consent to participating in the production of sexual texts or images – indeed sexual images of young people aged under eighteen are deemed 'child pornography'.ⁱ **KA**This regulatory discrepancy places young people (particularly sixteen and seventeen year olds) in a liminal zone between childhood and adulthood where they can participate in particular modes of embodied sexuality but may not document their own experiences of these activities (Albury, Funnell and Noonan, 2010). As ethical researchers,

then, it is vital to consider how 'children's difficult citizenship is intensified through the volatile relationship between sexuality and childhood; a relationship that is socio-culturally constructed and constantly mobilized not just to regulate children's lives, but also to maintain dominant relations' (Robinson 2012: 271).

The value of qualitative research methods for research with young people

The desire to see young people as 'co-participants' (Sime 2008, 64) and co-researchers in research that concerns them raises issues about research methods (Kellet 2010, Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor & Graham, 2012). While quantitative methods are useful in identifying broad trends and issues, for example, the age at which people first have intercourse or the numbers of young people diagnosed with an STD, they do not provide much detail about people's motivations and opinions (see Buckingham and Bragg 2003, 19). If we seek to recognize the agency of young people in making sense of their engagement with sensitive issues, qualitative research methods offer a more powerful way of doing this than does quantitative work.

Qualitative research can allow us to understand how young people make meaning out of their practices. For example, much research shows that young people continue to practice unsafe sex, despite being educated about safe sex practices (Rogge Steele 1999). Qualitative research begins to explain why this is the case, exploring the vital but nebulous concept of embodied and embedded meaning. Quantitative research often aspires towards linguistic neutrality, implying that words can have objective meanings – assuming that the subjects who fill in surveys will understand the words that are used in just the same way as do the researchers who create the surveys. But qualitative research shows us that this is not often the case. Qualitative research has explored, for example, how teenagers (girls in particular) receive media messages about sexuality as well as how they distribute that information – or

variations of it (see Ward et al 2006). This research demonstrates that young people interact with media, and particularly popular media, in nuanced ways and that meaning is always contingent on the context in which it is received as much as by the content.

Qualitative research allows researchers to explore the complexity of lived experience, which always exceeds representation – and particularly the representation of such slow-moving institutions as academic research. Qualitative research is the best way to identify new practices, including meaning-making practices, in populations: for example, the question of why young people engage in sex messaging (or sexting) on their mobile phones, where and how they do this, and what personal and social issues or repercussions they face in doing so. For example, Abbey Hyde and Etaoine Howlett's wide-scale qualitative analysis of teenage sexuality in Ireland used focus groups to go beyond existing survey data to understand the pressures and problems teenagers face, including their (poor) knowledge of STDs and the gender norms that contribute to their sexual decision-making (Hyde et al. 2005, 2008).

Our understanding of how young people make sense of these issues is enhanced because qualitative research can explore the ways language itself contributes to young people's identities and decision-making practices. For example, recent research by Paul Flanagan (2010, 2012, 2014) examines the role discourse and narrative play in shaping young people's sexuality in educational and social service settings. Focusing on management policies and practices within schools, he explores how they are used to respond to young people's sexual actions: for example, addressing the questions of when and how sexuality is deemed problematic, exploratory, or playful, and how young people's sexual behaviours come to be seen as such.

In an effort to develop reflexive ethical research processes that incorporate school teaching staff, counselors, students, and their parents, Flanagan

argues for research that enables young people to 'participate freely and fully as active agents that hold some tension of dependence and independence with adults' (2014: 143). This points to perhaps the most important benefit of qualitative research with young people into sensitive issues such as sexuality: it can show researchers the ways young people contribute as agents to the construction of their own sexuality and sexual experiences, and allow them to express themselves when it comes to issues that concern them (Powell & Smith 2009). For example, Judy Orme's (2007) use of drama to research childhood sexuality in 'Project Jump' not only captured the experiences of hard-to-reach young people but provided a creative outlet for them to contribute ideas to the research process. Project participants attended a play depicting a young couple's first sexual encounter, and then engaged in an interactive workshop exploring sexual health and relationships. The research team then utilized a range of strategies (including postcards, short surveys and small and large group discussions) to include all participants (including those with challenges in terms of concentration, language and literacy skills) to fully participate in the project evaluation process (Orme 2007, 362).

Similarly, Tracey Skelton (2008) discusses the use of participant-led discussions in a study on impoverished teenage girls (fourteen to seventeen years) in Wales, who not only felt empowered by the research process, but were able to successfully apply for a grant from the European Union to get computer training in their neighbourhood as a result of the responsibility they demonstrated through the project. Indeed, first name Graham and first name Fitzgerald (2010: 136) draw attention to current research that shows links between young people's participation in qualitative research and their wellbeing. They also argue that young people's participation in research can bring their voices into policy debates (see also Tisdall 2009, 5). While there are many high-profile (largely bio-medical) examples throughout history of harm done to children as the result of research (see Lederer and Grodin 1994), the majority of contemporary research carried out with children has been 'sensitive' and beneficial (Greig and Taylor 1999, 2). Indeed, Trudi James and Hazel Platzer (1999) argue that researchers have a 'moral duty' to

conduct research on vulnerable groups in order to improve their place in society (see also Hesse-Biber 2004).

Ethical considerations in qualitative research with young people about sensitive issues

Ethical research standards require us to scrutinize how we apply qualitative methods with young people to research sensitive issues. We note above that qualitative research methods offer the potential for research subjects to demonstrate agency in ways that are simply not possible with quantitative research. However, theoretical work on the notion of power and language insists that we must not ignore the power that is present in all knowledge-gathering relationships. Qualitative research may allow subjects to challenge the power held by researchers – but it does not simply allow them to express themselves transparently. For example, Lesley-Anne Gallacher and Michael Gallagher (2008) observe that participatory methods are no less ethically ambiguous than any other research method. The way power relations with adults shape children's voices and the situated nature and limits of children's voices is discussed by Spyros Spyrou (Spyrou 2011). Giving children a voice and accessing their views in ways that adequately represent their version of life remains complicated (Powell et al. 2012). Powell et al. also argue that, while there is a large body of literature that discusses children's participation rights in a general way, there is less published about children's participation rights in relevant academic research (2012,12). In this context we explore a number of ethical issues that have been identified as arising in the practice of qualitative research with young people about sensitive issues.

1. Young people are the same as adults and young people are different from adults

A key area of debate is whether or not young people should be regarded as 'similar or different' from adults (Morrow and Richards 1996, 270; Punch 2002). Current consensus suggests that they are in fact both: young people are just as competent as adults in their own way (the same) but also in need

of particular care (different). Greig and Taylor (1999, 2–3) argue that young people deserve to be treated differently to adults – on account of the future role they will play in adult society, their diversity and vulnerability – and that research about young people should be approached with special attention. They also note that young people are not ‘mini adults’ and do not always see the world in the same way or approach issues with the same values. Researchers have cautioned against superimposing adult-based ethical frameworks onto young subjects as young people can have different notions of concepts such as privacy, harm and benefit to the adults conducting the research (see Edwards and Alldred 1999; Skelton 2008; Gallagher 2009, 17).

In ethical terms, some researchers still regard young people as a vulnerable or marginalised group (Nyamathi 1998, 65; see also Liamputtong 2007).³ While this echoes traditional conceptions of the child as innocent or incompetent and contemporary concerns about risk, in this context it is used as a means to protect, not discount, young people in research. Linda Moore and Margaret Miller (1999, 1034) acknowledge the difficulty of defining vulnerability but argue it is characterised by a limited ability to ‘make personal life choices, to make personal decisions, to maintain independence, and to self-determine’. Using this definition, Samantha Punch (2002, 323) argues that young people are particularly vulnerable in an adult-dominated society that marginalises them through unequal power relations. Vulnerability raises particular ethical concerns. If vulnerable participants are not adequately informed throughout a research process, and asked to reflect upon stressful or painful things without adequate support, research can ‘reinforce’ vulnerability or marginalization rather than address it (Connolly 2003).

Ethical approaches to qualitative research with young people about sensitive issues therefore require a delicate balancing act between minimising harm while respecting the need to learn about young people’s experiences and

³ Other vulnerable groups include the elderly, ethnic minorities, gay and lesbian people, the chronically ill and the disabled.

hear their voices (see also Grodin and Glantz 1994). Indeed, there is a 'growing awareness that ethical issues with child research bring their own special considerations' (Hopkins and Bell 2008, 2).

2. Power imbalance

Differences in psychological, physical and political power between adult researchers and the young people they study pose a range of ethical problems (Hill et al. 2004; Valentine 1999; Graue and Walsh 1998, xiv). These differences can lead to situations of abuse of power, most easily with regards to informed consent – a key component of ethical research. It is possible for adults (as researchers, guardians or gatekeepers) to inadvertently coerce a young person into participating in a study or to prevent them from participating when they would have agreed to it on their own terms (see Gallagher 2009, 16).

3. Confidentiality

Young people are the subject of greater surveillance than most other groups, with their practices - particularly in relation to sensitive issues such as sexuality – the focus of intense scrutiny. Qualitative research with young people can involve discussions about their personal lives and opinions on topics such as relationships, family, school, drug use and sex (see for example, France 2000). In some cases, legislative instruments define all activity in these areas by young people – even if it is consensual – as abuse. Because researchers are required to report abuse to relevant authorities, the confidentiality of the young person can be compromised. For researchers, it is an ethico-legal quandary: do they honour the trust participants place in them or their duty of care as adults according to the legal system within which they are working?

To ameliorate difficulties raised by confidentiality, some researchers advocate explaining to participants at the outset that if instances of abuse or harm (as

defined by relevant laws) are reported during the research process they are required by law to inform relevant authorities, thereby giving young participants control over whether they disclose. Allan France et al. (2000) used this approach when investigating the health beliefs of children and young people, as did Melrose (2002) in her study of young prostitutes in England and Wales. Similarly, the Young People and Sexting in Australia Project provided participants with information regarding relevant laws and followed confidentiality protocols recommended by the Australian National Children and Youth Law Service (Albury et al. 2013). If reportable information is disclosed some researchers have discussed *how* they will report information with participants, providing them with greater control over the consequences of their disclosure (for examples, see Barbovschi et al. 2013).

4. Harm minimization

Protecting young people against physical, psychological or emotional harm is at the forefront of any Ethics Committee's consideration of research proposals that involve them. As Priscilla Alderson (2005, 27) notes, there may be a distinctive character to risk involved in qualitative research with young people about sensitive issues – small risks can have serious consequences for a young person. However, while benefits and risks are often easily identifiable in a clinical setting, the impact of qualitative research is often difficult to predict, both in terms of what it will mean for broader society and the individuals who participate in the study (Payne 2000, cf Farrell p.21). Priscilla Alderson and Virginia Morrow (2011, 27) argue that risks in social research are more likely to include things like distress, embarrassment, loss of self-esteem, and anxiety rather than physical harm. Also concepts of harm and risk in social research may not be as clear cut as they are in clinical studies (Powell et al 2012, 2). There is a chance that research will cause pain, embarrassment or suffering to young people who might be required to talk about uncomfortable or sad events in their lives or who might experience something confronting, unpleasant or unforeseen in the research process (Alderson 2003, 99). Shame and social stigmas may also be reinforced through clumsy report writing or media coverage of research (NSW

Commission for Children and Young People, 2005) and this is also of particular concern for research into vulnerable or marginalized populations of young people.

Creating safe spaces for young people to participate

Two major approaches have been identified to address the particular ethical issues of gathering qualitative data from young people about sensitive issues. The first is the use of data-gathering methods that create a research environment where young people are comfortable participating or withdrawing (Hopkins and Bell 2008, 2,3). One way to do this is to use the skills that children may be 'expert in', such as painting, drawing and recording for data-gathering (see Borland 2001). Shirley Prendergast (cited in Hallowell et al 2005) made use of the drawing method via a 'visual lifeline' for research on young, homeless LGB people. Prendergast used coloured textas and butchers paper to plot key events in the subject's lives to enable them to reflect positively on their past, present and future. Authors have also discussed the utility of methods that diffuse the power of the researcher, including group interviews and 'task' versus 'talk'-centric activities (see Hood et al 1996). In their study of sexualised goods aimed at children in Scotland, first name Buckingham et al. (2009) relied upon drawing and group discussions to give primacy to participants' voices (aged between nine and seventeen years old), ensuring an open-ended and non-threatening research environment.

Anne Greig and Jayne Taylor (1999, 6) also note the importance of studying children in neutral settings that do not signify adult power, as opposed to settings such as laboratories or schools (see also Buckingham et al 2009). A recent study of young gay and lesbian people's experiences in the UK consciously chose not to interview participants at school or at home, as these are places where they may have already felt marginalised or unsupported (see Skelton 2008). Instead, the study made use of familiar voluntary sector spaces in which participants were comfortable. Other studies have made use

of focus groups where adults are outnumbered by young people. In Hyde et al.'s (2005) study of sexuality among school children in Ireland, the use of focus groups allowed peers to challenge each other and bring their fears and concerns to the surface of the research in a non-confrontational manner. And Richard Hessler et al. (2003) removed the 'adult' from the research process through the use of online journals and emails to research young people engaging in risky behaviours. Hessler (2003) has noted this provided a familiar and informal means for the young people to communicate, providing far richer data than was obtained for a similar study conducted face to face in 1998.

Reflexive research methods to address ethical issues

A second important element of ethical qualitative research with young people on sensitive issues is a self-reflexive approach (Horton 2008, Guillemin & Gillam 2004, Flanagan 2014; Skanfors 2009). Gallagher (2009, p. 26), for example, argues that 'ethical process could be seen as an ongoing process of questioning, acting and reflecting, rather than straightforward application of general rules of conduct'. Reflexive approaches reject the idea that every element of a project's research method can be locked down before data gathering begins. Rather, all elements of a research method – including the size and make-up of the cohort, the process for gaining consent, the processes for gathering data, the process for analyzing data, the process for distributing results, and even the research questions themselves – are taken to be provisional, and open to the possibility of change depending on the feedback of the young people involved in the research (Tisdall 2009). Indeed some studies have gone so far as to include young people on the research team: in Clark's (2001) study of young refugees and asylum seekers, a small group of young adults (sixteen to 21 years old) were included on the research team at all stages of the process.

Conclusion

Researchers intending to engage in qualitative research with young people about sensitive issues, and the Ethics Committees who have to deal with proposals to do such research, often find themselves attempting to assess the ethical implications of approaches and subjects that are not familiar to them. In this chapter we have argued, firstly, that although qualitative approaches may on the surface appear to raise more challenging ethical issues than traditional quantitative research methods, an emerging literature proposes that such research can in fact be *more* ethical as it allows for the agency of young people to be recognized, and allows for their voices to be heard in relation to issues that affect them. A philosophical movement away from seeing young people as helpless and innocent, and instead recognizing and valuing their emerging agency, supports this perspective.

We have noted that there are particular issues with regards to the ethics of qualitative research with young people about sensitive issues: the fact that young people are both the same as adults, and different from them; that differences in power can be particularly stark in these situations; that legal requirements to report particular behaviours by young people can cause problems for confidentiality; and that young people may be particularly vulnerable to harm from apparently small risks in research. However, the literature has proposed two important ways to address these risks. The first is to create safe spaces for young people, for example by using forms of data-gathering that respect their expertise, by avoiding formal spaces for data-gathering, or by ensuring that young people's control of the process is emphasized. The second is to employ self-reflexive methods that are open to the possibility of change based on the feedback of young people involved in the research.

We hope that we have shown that, in reviewing the ethical framework for qualitative research with young people into sensitive issues, it is useful for researchers to understand ethical practice in the area, and it is our intention that this article will provide a useful starting point for this. Similarly, for

members of Ethics Committees assessing proposals to conduct qualitative research with young people into sensitive issues, the evaluation of ethical frameworks can acknowledge prior evidence about the methods and the situations in which young people, at different ages, feel supported and safe in participating in such research. Methods and protocols may differ in qualitative research from the methods and protocols that are appropriate in bio-medical and related fields. Again, we hope this article will provide a useful starting point for understanding this tradition. Researchers increasingly understand that young people, while they are in some ways different from adults, in other ways are developing their own agency and voice in relation to issues that concern them. Qualitative research can provide a route for supporting and recognizing this process. This article strives to provide information to help researchers and members of Ethics Committees as they address the ethical specificities of this work.

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¹ For an overview of Australian Commonwealth, State and Territory laws regarding young people, sexuality and media, see Tallon, Choi, Keeley, Elliott, and Maher 2012.