

Navigating Ethical Dilemmas in Participatory Research with Young People

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Participatory research projects with young people¹ often seek to empower them through knowledge and skills development to become independent actors who can advocate for themselves. However, they usually come with ethical complexities and potential risks that require careful navigation by lead investigators. This research article delves into the perils linked to young researchers exercising their discovered ‘power’ or rather ‘agency’ against ethical principles on a sensitive topic. Against this backdrop, the article advocates for (1) the necessity of providing ethical training to young participants, (2) maintaining ongoing follow-ups to recall the key issues, and (3) ensuring that the voices of young participants are actively integrated into the exploration of research ethics alongside adult researchers.

There is a growing body of literature on participatory research with children and young people concerning ethical considerations working with them (e.g. Abebe 2009; Hadfield-Hill et al. 2023; Loveridge et al. 2023). In spite of that, there persists a knowledge gap concerning the tensions arising from elevated levels of agency stemming from self-confidence gained through knowledge and skills training workshops (also referred to as ‘empowerment’ in this note), potentially leading to ethical dilemmas and breaches. Although it is not news that dilemmas and breaches may surface during dynamic research projects (Groundwater-Smith et al. 2014), there is a need to exchange experiences on how to address — or better prevent — those issues within the academic world (Loveridge et al. 2023).

Based on her experiences, the author emphasizes the challenges of balancing the interests of the universities (i.e. the ethical committees), the project team, the co-investigator, and finally the young participants. This delicate act demands ongoing reflection, or rather the ability to critically and reflexively navigate situational ethics within research environments influenced by various factors, such as social, cultural, and political dynamics (Ahsan 2009). This includes the author’s relationship with the young participants (Canosa, Graham, and Wilson 2018).

This article, authored by a co-investigator of the international participatory art-based research project Mobile Arts for Peace (MAP),² led by universities in the UK and Indonesia, offers insights into the author’s experiences in guiding young participants to conduct ethical, art-based research on their pressing issues of concern. The situation under discussion arose from the young participants’ proposal of addressing sexual abuse among adolescent girls in their community by creating a film to raise awareness among key stakeholders. To gather information for this mini-project, the young participants suggested conducting surveys on perceptions of community members concerning sexual abuse of adolescent girls and conducting interviews with young survivors with the assistance of a local project partner — a civil society organization that employs experienced care workers to support survivors of sexual abuse. This

proposal underwent careful consideration and discussion within the international and national project teams, while also checking with the approval of ethics committees. Ultimately, the young participants could proceed with developing both survey and interview questions but had to avoid highly sensitive questions. Young survivors were also given the ability to drop out at any time without providing a reason and the assurance of aftercare support for the interviewees (if needed and desired). This approach was selected to ensure ethical and safeguarding measures for both parties, the young researchers and the interviewees, while allowing the project activities to progress (Bradbury-Jones 2014; Gordon 2020).

The author's role was to facilitate the transformation of young people from participants to co-researchers (alongside other project team members). At the very beginning of the film project, the author³ helped participants with brainstorming about a topic of their choice and supported the proposal writing while constantly engaging the young researchers in discussions about the purpose of the project and the steps of filmmaking. Over time, the young researchers started to lead the discussions and co-created survey and interview questions. To ensure ethical research and the delivery of the project outputs, the young researchers attended workshops to develop their research skills (e.g. interviewing) alongside training on safeguarding and ethics. The workshops were led by different academic project team members. In these workshops, the young researchers were given time to discuss their ideas and concerns. However, the young researchers were most talkative when they debriefed the workshop only with the author (and not with the larger research team). As such, the author engaged the young researchers in a reflective discussion session after each workshop to learn more about their experiences.

As soon as interviews started, the author collaborated closely with the young researchers to ensure that data collection and storage adhered to the project's overarching data management plan. The recorded interviews and notes remained accessible only to the young participants, the author, and the CSO worker. Throughout this phase, the author repeatedly reminded everyone of the ethical principles and the corresponding safeguarding measures they had to follow.

Up until this point, the project had been progressing smoothly. However, the situation took a turn once the film script was drafted using the data collected from surveys and interviews. Following initial discussions and consultations with a filmmaker, the young researchers identified a gap in their data that needed addressing to improve the script and strengthen the film's overall message. Consequently, they decided to proceed with an additional interview of one of the survivors without prior consultation with the author and/or the CSO worker. The author only became aware of the interview after it had taken place, and she had to promptly take steps to address the situation.

As a result, the author sought guidance from another member of the academic project team and a collaborating psychologist. They agreed that the primary objectives were to minimize any potential harm to the survivor who was interviewed and to the young researchers while also proactively preventing any further ethical issues from arising. Thus, they implemented four key actions. Firstly, they conducted an online debriefing session with the young researchers to gain a better sense of the interview conducted with the young survivor. Moreover, the author

inquired about the interview process, the specific questions asked, and the reactions of the survivor, and also assessed the emotional well-being of the young researchers who were able to vent about the traumatic information received. For example, the young researchers felt uneasy when listening to the survivor's story. They did not anticipate the feeling because, they said, they had heard the story before.

This open approach helped the group deal with the experience that arose a range of challenging emotions (Jenn 2006; Bradbury-Jones 2014). They were provided with an outlet to express their emotions and share their perceptions about the interview process. This presented an opportunity for the author to offer support, including techniques such as breathing exercises, to help the researchers manage their emotional well-being. In addition, it allowed the team to reflect on the interview process itself, explore alternative approaches, and determine what kind of support should be extended to the survivors.

For the young researchers, the meeting provided an opportunity for self-reflection, starting from their initial decision-making process that culminated in interviewing the female survivor. Their motivation for undertaking the interview emerged from their pre-existing relationship with the survivor and their desire to convey her personal story through the film. However, they admitted that they had not fully comprehended the emotional impact of the traumatic narrative on themselves. This awareness prompted them to recognize their responsibility in making ethical decisions and contending with the emotional distress for all parties involved including accessing counselling supports to manage the emotional toll.

Secondly, the survivor received psychological support via an online counseling session, and the interviewee in question was granted the opportunity to review the film to ensure it accurately portrayed her desired narrative. The survivor expressed comfort and satisfaction with the result.

Thirdly, the author diligently maintained communication with the young researchers for a week after the interview to monitor any potential emotional distress. This effort was appreciated by the individuals as expressed through their quick responses to the author's calls and texts.

Overall, this ethical dilemma highlights the tension between empowered young individuals taking action and the ethical principles within a participatory project designed to foster power from within (Abebe 2009; Houghton 2015). It also points to the fact that these ethical principles are not part of the daily lives of young people. While the author acknowledged and valued the personal transformation of participants to take action, she was equally aware of the ethical risks and consequences. The situations underpinned the necessity to (1) ensure the safety and well-being of both the survivor and the young researchers (McLaughlin 2005), and (2) prevent any further measures that might potentially result in dilemmas or breaches. As a side effect, the author's relationship intensified with the group as the young people felt respected and well cared for (Bradbury-Jones 2014).

In terms of lessons learned, the author would like to suggest four issues: Firstly, investigators should allocate time for individual introspection, both on their part and that of the young

participants. Secondly, to enhance the understanding of safeguarding issues and measures within the group, research teams should engage in recurrent activities such as ‘what if’ scenarios. Thirdly, research teams could develop and distribute FAQ sheets among the group to address common questions and concerns. Fourthly, it is imperative to engage in further research and exchange of experiences to provide support and guidance to others facing similar ethical challenges in the context of academic and participatory projects.

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Notes

¹ The young people (researchers) were between 15 and 20 years old.

² Mobile Arts for Peace (MAP) is a participatory, arts-based, practice-as-research focused on peacebuilding in Indonesia, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, and Rwanda. This collaborative effort unites universities, cultural artists, civil society organizations, and, most notably, children and youth.

³ Alongside other project team members.

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