Guidance Paper 5: Recruiting Children for Research: How, Where and Why?

This paper addresses the ethical issues in the context of recruiting children for research. It is Guidance Paper 5 in the series *The Ethics of Research Involving Children: Common Questions, Potential Strategies and Useful Guidance*.

Carrying out research with, by or on children raises a number of sampling questions from a practical, ethical and attitudinal perspective, such as:

- *Why is it important to involve children directly in this research (what is the added value?)*

- *How can I ensure that the profile and characteristics of my research participants adequately reflect the aims and objectives of my research?*

- *Does my sample include an appropriately diverse mix of young people (in terms of ethnicity, age, socio-economic background, gender etc) to minimise potential distortion or skewing of my research findings?*

- *How and from where can potential research participants be recruited?*

- *What precisely is their role within the research project?*

- *Should they receive payment?*

1. Accessing a Sample

Every researcher should firstly be clear as to what exactly the scope and purpose of their research aims are. While this may seem obvious, such awareness shapes decisions about sampling which, in turn, contributes to the quality and reliability of the research findings.

In essence, sampling "is used to make inferences about some larger population from a smaller one".[1] The researcher should, therefore, begin with defining clearly the core characteristics and profile of the group that need to be recruited. For example, it is important that the sample recruited reflects the diversity of any community/group under investigation, including variables of gender, disability, sexuality and ethnicity, depending on the research topic.

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[1] Bruce L. Berg [2005] *Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, Allyn and Bacon, 4th Edition, at p. 30.

For research involving children, as with research involving adults, the researcher should be prepared to justify and explain why a particular sampling method was adopted. Below are some of the common sampling devices used within the social sciences. However, the choice of sampling method will depend on the research question and the characteristics of the group that the researcher wishes to interrogate. When adopting the chosen sampling method, the researcher should be aware of specific ethical issues associated with them.

Simple Random Sample

A simple random sample describes when a member of the population has an equal and independent chance of inclusion in the eventual sample to be studied. One key consideration is the envisaged size of the study which will ultimately determine the size of the sample. For example, if the research involves ascertaining the experiences of children aged 13-16 years in relation to the quality of their education in English secondary schools, a random sample might include selecting 30 children from a potential pool of 100 children to take part in the study.

Systematic Random Sampling

Systematic random sampling is useful when large population lists are available and involves selecting every nth name from the list. For example, in research ascertaining the experiences of young girls in juvenile secure units/detention centres, a systematic random sample might include selecting every fifth name on a list of 100 in a particular institution to generate a sample size of 20 girls.

Stratified Random Sampling

Stratified sampling is used when the researcher wants to ensure that a specified and identifiable segment of the population under examination is represented within the sample. In this regard, the population is divided into smaller sub-classifications or 'strata' where each member shares a common attribute. For example, for the research on young girls within detention facilities, a stratified random sample could involve further subdividing the population into sub-strata according to ethnicity or age and then selecting the nth person within that each stratum.

Convenience Sampling

Convenience sampling refers to cases where a particular sample group is close at hand or available to the researcher. For example, if a researcher wishes to explore children's experiences of immunisation programmes, they may recruit respondents from schools in the local area. Researchers should be aware that convenience sampling may also be used by other researchers in an institution, so ensuring that

groups are not over-researched is an important consideration, and the basis on which the participants were sampled should be openly acknowledged, along with any biases that may produce.

Purposive Sampling

Sometimes referred to as judgmental or subjective sampling, purposive sampling is where the researcher uses their special knowledge about a particular group of people to select participants who represent this group. Purposive sampling is deployed where the participants are especially knowledgeable about the topic under examination. For instance, research ascertaining the effects of parental incarceration on children and young people would deliberately select the children of imprisoned parents. When considering purposive sampling, again, the researcher needs to accommodate the specific vulnerabilities and needs of the participants within the ethical framework of the study.

Snowball Sampling

Snowball sampling is where "informants refer the researcher to other informants, who are contacted by the researcher and then refer her or him to yet other informants, and so on".[2] It is commonly used to ensure people with certain attributes or characteristics or those that are 'hard to reach' are included within the study. For example, research involving sensitive issues like drug use, knife-crime or gang activity among children and young people may deploy snowball sampling where word of mouth may the best way to recruit participants. Whilst the use of snowball sampling can be beneficial for harder to reach potential participants, it requires consideration for vulnerable groups as it may generate tensions between participants and peers. It can also generate a sample with a particular concentration of participants from the same community or with shared knowledge and experiences. It is therefore important that if researchers aim to use snowballing that they should consider how information about the study is shared and communicated by other participants to ensure their welfare and anonymity.

2. Recruiting Research Participants

How and from where to recruit children and young people for research raises a number of important ethical issues.

2.1 Recruiting Children and Parents Directly

It may be that the research recruitment strategy is best done directly, depending on the researcher and the study itself, providing information to children and their parents. Often direct recruitment happens

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[2] See Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: the hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(4), 327-344. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53861, at p.330.

where the researcher already has a role working with children or within an organisation that cares for or educates children. Whilst in such cases the researcher may be familiar and approachable to children and their families, consideration must be given to power dynamics, potential feelings of coercion and any impact on the researcher's day to day role with the children and their families. Researchers should also acknowledge that recruitment for the research would still require permission from the organisation and a separate DBS check as it will more than likely fall outside of their everyday role and responsibilities.

In the case of much younger children, it will be parents who are recruited and provide informed consent for their child to participate in the research, although researchers must consider assent (see Guidance Paper 2). If the researcher is contacting parents directly, researchers must consider how this can be achieved and that they must comply with data protection legislation (See Guidance Paper 6) and organisational policies and processes.

2.2 The Role of Gatekeepers

Seamus's experience with gatekeepers:

> *"I worked with a children's rights organisation to access young people. With over 25 years' experience in working alongside children across a range of issues, the organisation was instrumental in helping me recruit both child researchers and participants to examine the issue of school exclusions in England. I have no doubt that their experience, and internal safety protocols ensured a relatively smooth ethical application procedure."*

In broad terms, "gatekeeper' commonly refers to adults who are able to facilitate researchers' access to the participants. They can play an important function in not only creating research pathways for 'hard to reach' participants but also for building relationships of trust between the researcher and prospective participants. Gatekeepers also ensure that children are protected from any potential harms that arise from the research. However, researchers should consider the relationship between gatekeepers and potential participants, considering any issues of power or potential coercion.

Youth and community groups, schools, civil society organisations and a wide array of statutory and non-statutory organisations that work with and on behalf of children and young people are commonly approached as gatekeepers. The success of partnerships with gatekeepers depends very much on the amount of time and effort a researcher invests in building up a relationship with them in advance of undertaking the research. This may involve spending time with the staff and young people connected with the organisation and developing mutual trust and understanding. During this time, the researcher should familiarise themselves with the organisation's own ethical protocols including their internal safeguarding and child-protection policies.

Given that children have a legal right under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to express their views in all matters which affect them and for their views to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, it is important that they are afforded the opportunity, should they wish, to participate in research. In this regard caution should be exercised by the researcher and/or gatekeeper in "gate-keeping children out of research purely on the basis of potential risk to them". (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010: 133). Rather, to fully respect children's participation rights, the researcher should work with the relevant gatekeepers to build the necessary support and structures to enable children to make fully informed decisions regarding whether they wish to participate in the research.

2.3 Recruiting through schools

Schools can play a very important part in the sampling process and can provide the researcher with relatively easy access to young people from a range of different backgrounds. However, sampling through schools raises important practical and ethical questions that the researcher should consider. For example:

- What role will the school itself have in recruiting potential participants? Does the school have to adhere to its own ethical and procedural protocols (for example around parental consent) and are these compatible with the researcher's own institution's ethical protocols?

- Specific consideration should be given to any impact upon a pupil of participating in the research. For example, will participation disrupt school work or lessons? Will participation at school potentially lead to any tensions between participants and their peers? Are parents aware of their participation?

- Will the recruitment process ultimately distort the representative integrity of the sample (for example if the school is tasked with selecting students, but does so on the basis of who it perceives to be 'good' or 'deserving')? To what extent will pupils' engagement with the research process be monitored or curtailed by the school?

- Is the school environment the best forum for conducting the research? Can children and young people be truly honest and forthcoming within such an environment? Does the particular school selected offer a potential sample that will prove sufficiently diverse or representative for the purposes of the study? Will the timing/length/location of your research be determined and perhaps constrained by the school's timetable/needs.

Rachel's experience of researching in schools:

> *"I think my experiences in school are pretty routine: having to go with the timetable; having teachers listening in; teachers selecting students to participate in research; feeling like you 'owed' them… So the power is still very much in adults' hands. School in itself is an institution with a power imbalance."*

The potential gains/limitations of accessing children through schools need to be carefully balanced, and investing sufficient time in developing a relationship of trust and understanding with key members of staff and the pupils is all the more important.

2.4 Online Recruitment

Online recruitment may be an excellent and practical way of reaching potential participants. However, researchers should consider using organisational websites as platforms to recruit or as collaborators in sharing information about a study. If using social media to recruit, researchers should think about the platform choice and ensure that potential participants are not 'tagged' or coerced into participating. Furthermore, parents may also be concerned about their children being contacted directly in this way. For more general guidance on ethical issues in online research see Guidance Paper 4.

3. Remunerating or Compensating Children for their Participation in Research

The issue of compensating children and young people for their involvement in research raises a number of issues. Should they be paid? How much should they be paid? Can vouchers be a preferable alternative? And are such payments ethical in a population that largely lacks financial independence and income? There are varying views on this. The main objection to payments is that they may place pressure on young people to take part in research that they are not otherwise comfortable with being part of. There is, in fact, no clear evidence to support this view. In fact, research has revealed that children are willing and keen to participate in research regardless of payments.[3]

It is useful, when developing your ethics framework, to be clear about the aims of the payment. Alderson and Morrow (2020: 74-75) list the reasons for payment as including:

- reimbursing expenses (such as travel to and from research venues)

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[3] Taplin, S., Chalmers, J., Hoban, B., McArthur, M., Moore, T. and Graham, A. (2019) 'Children in social research: do higher payments encourage participation in riskier studies?', *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 14: 126–40.

- compensating for time, inconvenience and possible discomfort (based on an hourly rate for example)

- as a token of appreciation for participants' help

- as reasonable payment for a specific task or assistance (in the same way that adults, including the researchers are paid for their time)

- to recompense people who would have been earning by working if they had not been helping with the research.

Similarly, Wender et al, identify four categories of payment (Reimbursement; Compensation; Appreciation; Incentive) and recommend developing a clear policy and guidance for advertising and making payment to children. All of this guidance reinforces the point that, if handled sensitively and their justification articulated clearly, such payments are entirely ethical and reciprocal given the value of young people's contributions to research.

Many researchers feel uneasy about compensating child participants (or, indeed, any participants) in cash and opt for vouchers instead. Vouchers are administratively easier to manage (in terms of financial auditing), but it is worth asking whether this form of payment would be preferable for participants? If vouchers are the preferred option, it is important to ensure that they are suitable (for example, do they rely on access to the internet and a stable home address for online purchases?; do they presume that the child has particular preferences or interests – such as book vouchers?). Cash payments, on the other hand, may reinforce respect for the child's autonomy and trust (to decide what they do with their own money). For cash transfers, participants are required to have a bank account, which many children do not have access to. Releasing hard cash from research institutions to pay participants can be difficult but is not impossible and there are some workarounds that researchers can negotiate with their accounts departments to allow for this type of payment.

Should the researcher decide to financially compensate the children and young people involved, this will have to be factored into the funding arrangements. In the UK, there is no minimum wage entitlement for children under the age of 16, but a sound children's rights-based approach would ensure that all children are remunerated equally and appropriately, depending on the nature of their involvement. But of course, such arrangements have to be sensitive to the context of the research, culturally, socially and economically. Although there is not a framework that considers these issues, Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) offers comprehensive guidance on payment and remuneration. Compensation should not normally be dependent upon children completing their participation in the research, and they should still receive the compensation even if they were to withdraw early from the study.

The University of Liverpool for example, pays members a cash fee of £10 per hour to take part in its Young Persons Advisory Group (see Guidance Paper 1) and many research projects across the university automatically include payments for participation on a par with adult participants' payments. Where payment details are required, researchers must comply with legal and institutional data protection requirements (see Guidance Paper 6).

Whatever decision regarding payment, the underpinning reasons and justifications should be clearly outlined, and a clear financial trail of all payments should be kept for auditing purposes which protects the child's identity.

For research involving focus groups or larger cohorts of children, another option is to pay the gatekeeper organisation a fee on the understanding that the money will be used to support the organisation's activities and support for young people.

Useful resources

Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC).Ethical Guidance: Payment and Compensation.

Priscilla Alderson & Virginia Morrow (2020) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*, second edition, Chapter 5 and 5.

Gobo, G. (2004) *Sampling, Representativeness and Generalizability*, in Seale et.al., (2004) *Qualitative Research Practice*, SAGE, Chapter 28.

Graham, A., & Fitzgerald, R. (2010) *Children's participation in research: Some possibilities and constraints in the current Australian research environment*, Journal of Sociology, 46: 133-147.

Alan Bryman (2012) Social Research Methods, 4th Edition, Oxford University Press, Chapter 8.

Lundy, L. and McEvoy, L., (2011) Children's rights and research processes: Assisting children to (in)formed views, *Childhood*, 19(1): 129 – 144

Powell, M.A and Smith, Anne. B (2009) Children's Participation Rights in Research, *Childhood*, 16(1): 124 – 142.

Wender et. al., (2002) *The ethics of paying for children's participation in research*, Journal of Paediatrics, 141(2), pp. 166 – 171.