



Youth Participation in Qualitative Research: Challenges and Possibilities

“Social work researchers have a unique capacity to conduct qualitative research with youth and to negotiate the logistical challenges and ethical considerations involved” (p. 518).

1. What is the research about?

Research with youth can present many logistical and ethical concerns, which can deter researchers from engaging young people in their work. This article aims to support professionals interested in conducting qualitative research with youth by describing how to manage these challenges. In particular, the authors discuss effective strategies in four key areas: (i) gaining access, (ii) collaborating with *gatekeepers* (intermediaries who can provide access to youth, e.g., parents, guardians, teachers, and youth workers) and data collection sites, (iii) managing informed consent and assent procedures (when youth have not reached the legal age of consent, guardians must *consent* and young people must *assent*, or agree, to participate), and confidentiality considerations, and (iv) compensating participants.

2. Where did the research take place?

The authors drew on studies that took place in the United States.

3. Who is this research about?

The studies discussed in the article focus on diverse groups of youth aged 12-18.

4. How was the research done?

The researchers conducted a literature review on the evolution of children and youth’s inclusion in research, which is derived largely from a human rights perspective (i.e., the idea that children and youth have the right to participate). They use existing literature to summarize the differences between research with children and youth and research with adults.

The authors draw on their own experiences to identify effective strategies for engaging youth in qualitative research. The six studies discussed in the article use a variety of methods, including focus groups, individual interviews, and participant observation.

5. What are the key findings?

The researchers identify three key differences between research with children and youth (under the age of 18) and research with adults:

i) Legal status and protection.

When conducting research with children and youth, it is almost always necessary to receive parent or guardian consent, a logistical concern that is rarely present in research with adults.

ii) Developmental capacities.

Researchers must assess children’s competency, including their age, maturity, cognitive ability, moral development, psychological state, and social environment.

iii) Power differentials.

Power imbalances between adult researchers and child/youth participants can influence their overall participation.

The authors then discuss effective approaches for addressing challenges when conducting research with youth (aged 12-18):

i) Gaining access.

Working with youth participants typically requires intermediaries to provide access and/or legal consent. As a result, communication, collaboration, and the development of rapport is critical. Researchers can engage in ongoing communication with gatekeepers to show appreciation for their role in the research process.

ii) Collaborating with gatekeepers and data collection sites.

Obtaining consent from guardians is often necessary when working with children and youth, but it can also pose challenges. Guardians may refuse, or they could consent even when the young person does not assent (or agree) to the research. Consent and assent procedures should ensure that young people have a full understanding of all risks and continue throughout the research process.

iii) Managing informed consent and assent procedures, and confidentiality considerations.

In some circumstances, it may be necessary to modify consent procedures. This is only warranted when guardian consent may result in harm to the child or young person, infringe on their rights to privacy, or create unjust exclusion (e.g., LGBTQ youth who are not yet out to their families). In these cases, there should be an established rationale for modifying the assent process.

Data should be kept confidential, and situations that warrant breaking confidentiality should be outlined to participants. As qualitative research often involves the collection of highly personal information, the relationship with researchers may be construed as personal or therapeutic. If research reveals issues that pose risks to the young person, it may be necessary for researchers to connect with experts in child abuse or mental health.

iv) Compensating participants.

Since financial compensation can be considered a form of coercion, it should be given at the time of consent or assent, and youth should be made aware that they can withdraw from the study at any time. Other forms of compensation may include items such as gift cards or coupons.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This study describes the logistical and ethical issues that researchers should be mindful of when working with children and youth participants. Youth-serving organizations can use these guidelines to develop positive relationships with, and experiences for, youth in research environments. The findings can also inform program evaluation, including staff training, recruitment, research design, and budgeting.



Schelbe, L., Chanmugam, A., Moses, T., Saltzburg, S., Williams, L. R., & Letendre, J. (2015). Youth participation in qualitative research: Challenges and possibilities. *Qualitative Social Work, 14*(4), 504-521.