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How do I go about engaging young people as researchers?

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[MUSIC PLAYING] OK. Carol McNaughton Nichols, thank you very much for agreeing to talk to us today.

The first question I wanted to ask you is, how do I go about engaging young people as researchers? Well, from a very practical point of view, initially you need to make contact with young people who may have an interest in your topic, or an interest in research, or preferably both. So you've got to, maybe to gatekeepers as you're advertising what you're doing.

Find some young people who've got an interest in assisting you with your research. So I'd say one way might be to advertise the opportunity for something such as we work with, we drafted the opportunity to work with us as a job description and advertised this on our website. And also via newsletters of youth organizations who work with young volunteers. So they could then contact us if they had an interest in taking part in the research for us.

Another example might be to make contact with a gatekeeper organization, an organization already working with young people, that might already have an existing group of young people who would be willing to help you. You could make contact with them and perhaps attend where they already meet, and make contact with them in that way. One thing to really remember-- if they're aged between 16 to 18, and certainly if they're under 16, you probably want to make sure their parents or guardian are also aware of the fact you're in contact with them.

Over the age of 18, that's not so difficult. But, for those who are older, probably advertising the position is more suitable. For younger people you want to get involved in the research, you'd probably want to go through a gatekeeper organization, so that you can make sure that their parents and guardian will be informed, and you've got that extra level of protection. What's also really clear is all this can take a lot of time, even making contact with young people to get involved in your research.

And it's really important that you set out clearly from the beginning the outline of the research project, and the expectations for their involvement-- and also the timescales that might be involved, and the type of tasks they'll be involved in. If this is clear, then you're more likely to be able to maintain that engagement throughout, because the young people know what to expect, and you can stick to that agreement with them.

You do want that to be flexible, of course, but you need to think about what sort of training you can provide, what sort of support you provide, exactly what it is you would like the young people to get involved in with your research. And also things like resources. If they're traveling, will you be able to pay their travel expenses? Very practical matters like that. It's really important you think through all these issues before making the contact with young people to get involved in your research.

On what sort of research designs can young people participate as researchers? Well, technically, actually, I don't think there's any limit. I think [INAUDIBLE] with any research design, as I said, the key is to consider from the beginning at what stage they're going to be involved, and how they're going to be involved, because that will make a difference to what they can be involved in.

For example, at the early stage of a quantitative project, you could ask their views on the focus of the research questions. You could ask their views [INAUDIBLE] designing the questionnaire and the language that's used. You could ask their views about the best way to recruit the sample that you'd like to have. You're not limited, but it's when you're able to involve them that really matters, and how they're going to be able to be involved.

So you might also be able to train young people to actually conduct the interviews. That could be questionnaires, or it could be in-depth interviews, for example. Participatory work has traditionally been associated with qualitative methodologies, but [INAUDIBLE] necessarily limited to that. The key thing is to make sure you've got the training and support in place, so that it is a meaningful involvement.

So whatever your research design is, the people you're involving as researchers can do that in an active and not passive manner, because you've made sure that the structures are in place to clearly inform them of the process and that project. So they can also make an informed decision if they would suggest changes to that research design regarding what you can and can't do. So I think really it's about ensuring adequate training and support.

The only slight caveat to that might be if it was research of a very sensitive nature, or that it might have risk to the researchers. Doing participatory work is never the easy option. It can be more resource intensive. And you have an additional responsibility to the people that you're involving as researchers. So you might have to question the nature of the research, if it was particularly sensitive, whether or not it's appropriate.

So it's not so much the design, but the actual focus of the research you should think about. Can you have examples of work where young people have been involved in the designs and testing of questions? That sounded really interesting to me. We do quite often try and involve people-- young people, or whoever's the focus of the research-- we do try and involve them, if we can, as a sort of user involvement stage.

To run by the idea of the design, the appropriateness of the design. And it often raises issues you wouldn't have thought about yourself. And also go to the questions, and language of the questions. With regards to young people, recently we are conducting the evaluation of [INAUDIBLE], which is the youth volunteer organization in England. And we have a team of young researchers who work with us on that project.

And they helped us to design questions that we were going to use when we interviewed other young volunteers on the experiences. And all of the people involved, the young people involved, and all those researchers have also been young people who volunteered. So we can ask them to think from their perspective, what type of questions we should ask to meet the objectives that we have for the research.

And they came up with some really useful suggestions for that. So, I think as a matter of good practice, if at all possible, at the beginning of your research project, if you can try to, even at quite a low level, have some communication with the group that will be the focus of the research. That will really assist in strengthening your questions and the language you use. OK. So when or where would participatory approaches using, or with young people, when would they be inappropriate?

Well, as I noted before, you'd have to consider the topic of the research. If it's very sensitive, you might have to question whether it's appropriate to involve young people in research of this nature. I don't think that you should necessarily exclude young people from being involved in sensitive research, but that you should make sure that if they are involved, adequate support is in place.

So for example, you have regular debriefing meetings. And you make very clear that they didn't have to remain involved in the research. If they're finding it at all difficult, they can cease at any point. I think really, before involving any group in your research, the researcher needs to complete an exercise-- or the research team-- where they sit down and really think about why it is they want to involve people in the research, and the benefit of this.

They also have to make sure that the involvement will be genuine involvement. Look at what aspects of the research other people can actually influence and really have a voice. Because I think that's the most important thing, to make sure it's not [INAUDIBLE]. You do not do participatory research because you think it's a good idea, but you're unclear exactly why. You have to think about, why is this a good idea?

What will my research really benefit from it? And how can I make sure that the involvement is meaningful? I think if you don't do that, then that's when it would be inappropriate. It could even be considered slightly exploitative to involve people if it's not meaningful involvement. One thing to note,

though, that people have to be clear about, is that such meaningful involvement is time consuming.

It is resource intensive. And also the people who are involved in your research have other commitments. So you have to have a good deal of flexibility. They might be limited in the amount of time, for example, that they can actually offer. So a lot of flexibility has to be in place, as well as a lot of support. But there can be great benefits as well. Great. I wonder if [INAUDIBLE] some participatory methods that we don't get from other methods?

Well, depending on the nature of your research, it could be that participatory methods are the most appropriate, per se. Is it action research? Are you trying to engage a community that doesn't usually have a voice? Are the research questions that you're going to ask actually clear to you, or do you need to do some work beforehand to make sure that they are? So participatory methods, involving people as the focus of the research and the research on them, can be really helpful to frame the relevant questions.

So make clear to the research team what it is that you really want to investigate and what's most relevant to the group you're investigating. Involving young people or anyone in participatory methods, can also assist with the practical matters, such as the ethics of the process. Are you engaging young people in an appropriate manner as research respondents? Are you going to use language that's appropriate for these young people?

You can ask the people that you're involving in the research as a stopgap to this. Other benefits of involving young people in research about young people-- so, they can actually act to foster trust in your project. So the gatekeeper organizations you might be wishing to recruit respondents through, or the young people that might get involved in the research themselves, may feel that they have more of a degree of trust that the research process will be done in an appropriate manner.

So it can really help break down these barriers, and it can help with recruitment. You do have to be aware, however, if you are going to use young people as interviewers, it's not always the case that groups will necessarily be most comfortable being interviewed by somebody in a similar situation from themselves. So you might have to provide a choice. It might be that the young people you're researching would actually rather do an interview with a professional researcher.

So that kind of comes down to personal choice, and you might have to have that flexibility in your research design. Really, I think involving the community that are the focus of the research in the research process acts to strengthen your process. Because as I said, it does have that additional stopgap. When you go to look at your findings, as well, you can assess with those people who've been involved in the research whether the findings are those that you would expect.

If they're not, if there's any surprises, you can maybe consider a little bit more about why that is. And as I said, when you come to disseminate the findings, the fact that you've involved the community and focus [INAUDIBLE], kind of has trust in findings that you present as well. Really, the main thing is just to ensure that training and support is available throughout. And that people can be involved throughout, if at all possible, so that they can really engage in the research and understand the research process.

I think only then can you say you're involving people as researchers. So it can't be people who-- they just happened to be there. You have to allow them to have skills to actively participate in your research. You also, I think, have to consider the exit strategies from the very outset, particularly when working with young people, and ensure that their length of involvement is clearly set for them from the start.

But beyond that, it's really very flexible. The sky's the limit. You need to think about how it's going to work for your project. It could be a one-off consultation at the beginning, or the end, with a single group, asking them about the findings, or asking about the design. Or it could be a very long-term and detailed involvement, true participatory work, where they have a say on everything from the

research questions, to the way the field work's conducted, conducting the field work, and analysis and dissemination.

There's a lot more advice, actually, at the [INAUDIBLE] websites like the National Children's Bureau's website. So I mainly just recommend to think about why it is you want to do it, make sure you have a very clear strategy in place as to what you're going to do, first of all, and then work from there. Carol McNaughton Nichols, thank you very much. [MUSIC PLAYING]