

Our Voices University Network:

*A briefing on our
PhD student forum*

NOVEMBER 2023

Introduction

Our Voices University Network

The Our Voices University Network (OVUN) formed one half of 'Our Voices III', a project coordinated by the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at the University of Bedfordshire. The OVUN was established to facilitate links between academics around the world in order to develop and share knowledge about the prevention of and response to child sexual abuse and exploitation.

It was recognised that those undertaking doctorate studies related to the area of child sexual abuse and exploitation hold a wealth of knowledge on this topic. One strand of the OVUN therefore focussed on creating a space where doctoral students could come together to share knowledge and understanding.

This briefing shares learning from the PhD student forum sessions that were held over the course of the project. Here, we reflect on what forum members have shared about:

- the tensions and challenges of doing doctoral research on child sexual abuse and exploitation (or related topics/other forms of harm)
- what they have valued about the forum
- what support needs they have which are not being met

It is hoped that the learning captured in this briefing will be of use to other PhD researchers and supervisors who are undertaking or supporting work in this field.

About the PhD student forum and its members

22 PhD students signed up to the forum, with a core group of ten attending sessions on a regular basis (typically four to seven in attendance at each session). 12 two-hour (online) sessions took place between November 2021 and November 2023.

The forum was open to doctoral students internationally, although the majority of members (17) were based at UK universities. Two members based at UK universities were, however, conducting fieldwork overseas and others were able to bring in international perspectives and experiences. Alongside doctoral studies, many members were also working in practice roles, such as social work. For many, this had informed their choice of topic. Forum members' research topics related to child sexual abuse and exploitation, or topics of relevance to the child protection field more broadly. They included:

- boys who display sexually harmful behaviour
- mental health outcomes for male survivors of child sexual and labour exploitation and trafficking

- healing and recovery after child sexual abuse
- perceptions and attitudes around child sexual exploitation in schools, and associated support systems
- the role of children and young people in preventing sexual violence
- stigma and collective sense-making of experiences among young people who have experienced child sexual abuse
- school responses to forced marriage
- online grooming
- legal reforms and access to justice in relation to child sexual violence cases

The two-hour sessions were typically split into two halves. The first provided an opportunity for one or two students to present their research in more detail, and any particular challenges or achievements they wanted to focus on, followed by Q&A and discussion. The second half typically focused on a particular cross-cutting theme – or continued discussion of an issue arising from presentations. While each session followed a similar format, they were delivered with a participative spirit – with flexibility to adapt and use the time in whatever way felt most helpful to the group on the day.

The cross-cutting themes discussed included participation and the differing concepts, definitions, and jurisdictions related to this work. Four of the sessions, were attended by guest speakers who gave presentations and facilitated discussion on a range of topics including: empathy and adolescence; the dissemination of research; researcher welfare and support; and the intersections of research and practice knowledge systems.

Sessions were facilitated by Claire Soares with support from Our Voices colleagues Dr Claire Cody and Professor Jenny Pearce.

What PhD students wanted from the forum

At the initial session, members were asked what they wanted to get out from the forum. They described an interest in and desire for:

- hearing about others' research, including issues they experienced and how they have/are overcoming these
- sharing resources, opportunities and events
- learning about different perspectives and approaches
- discussing the factors that affect PhD researchers working in this field
- a space that promoted a sense of wellbeing and support
- discussing child and youth participation and navigating how to safely and ethically engage young people in the context of doctoral studies
- discussion of how concepts related to child sexual abuse and exploitation differ globally in different contexts

Key Messages

Challenges and tensions discussed

Forum members shared and discussed a range of issues that had posed challenges for them. These included:

Recruitment of research participants

- issues around the recruitment of participants who may be relatively difficult to engage/access (e.g. young people from particular ethnic communities or certain groups of professionals)
- navigating the ethical recruitment of young people specifically (e.g. assessing readiness to participate, balancing participation and protection rights, decision-making around sample criteria, and approaches to parent/carer consent)

Navigating the participation of children and young people

- how to reconcile the flexibility sought from a participatory approach with the detail and rigidity of ethics application processes
- establishing relationships with facilitating agencies and gatekeepers
- how to explain/communicate research/certain terms to young people
- navigating boundaries in terms of to what extent we can give young people control (and assess whether they want control), and managing one's own boundaries as a researcher in line with ethics processes
- managing group dynamics when bringing young people together
- compensating young people in the absence of external funding

“You said that you’ve planned the design quite rigidly and then you want to have more flexibility. And I think that’s the point where I’m at right now with my design. But how did you navigate that within your ethics application? Are you going to make amendments as you go along or did you include different options for what you might be doing?”

Ensuring research is relevant and applied

- managing relationships with practitioners and the extent to which they are (and should be) involved in projects
- how to effectively advocate for change in practice settings as a doctoral researcher (while recognising existing organisational systems, progress and boundaries)
- navigating one's role as researcher versus role as practitioner

International data collection and analysis

- additional challenges of international data collection and analysis (e.g. having to translate data, reliance on local practitioners/researchers to promote and/or facilitate young people's engagement, managing the safety of local facilitators)

Other ethical concerns

- concerns around sharing research back with participants, noting the lengthy timescales attached to doctoral studies
- issues of confidence over whether they have interpreted participant data correctly
- concerns around anonymity of participants when sample criteria is relatively niche (e.g. professionals in specialist roles)
- questions around anonymisation (e.g. whether children and young people should be able to choose if they want to be identified)

“So that's another looming issue, another thread that's going around in my head because these are special courts and these are special judges. So they are really very few. So it won't be difficult for someone in the top level to find out who these people were who actually gave interviews and that's another ethical [issue] as well as this issue of confidentiality and protecting my participants from harm.”

Dissemination

- questions around 'over-publishing' or over-using data and how many papers/outputs you should publish from your thesis (and in what formats)
- which journals are best to approach for articles on specific topics and which types of written pieces are most suitable (e.g. reflective pieces, papers grounded in primary data)

What students have valued about the forum

- the uniqueness of a space where students are all working on issues related to child sexual abuse and sexual violence
- having an informal space to talk about an issue that those in our everyday lives may be less open to talking about
- learning from and being inspired by peers, particularly around recruitment of research participants, designing research materials, consent, participatory methods, theories and frameworks, analysis, dissemination and outputs
- the sparking of new ideas and considerations
- the sharing of resources
- the opportunity to informally share current ideas and thinking in motion
- having the opportunity to receive feedback or be questioned about their research plans by people outside their supervisory team
- working together to define and explore concepts and language
- feeling reassured about the value of their research
- being able to gather ideas for potential external examiners

What is currently missing for PhD students engaged in this field of research?

Members of the forum identified a lack of supportive and informal spaces where they can hear about the research of others and exchange learning and experiences. There is a clear appetite for continued opportunities to share, learn, and collaborate with others working on similar topics.

“In many ways, thinking about sexual violence and abuse is familiar as I worked for so long with people whose lives have been affected by it in different ways. Yet being a learner/ researcher feels very different and this is why safety in the forum means so much to me. Rather than being a space where we all have certainty and control over our work, the forum reflects the nature of participatory research about sensitive subjects which requires privileging voices we rarely hear, learning in a different way and getting more comfortable with the dilemmas and tensions that are never prettily packaged up.”

“If we could facilitate working together on an article on how we are each working on – and navigating – different things, just something that brings it all together because it is a very unique group and I think [an article] would be a good output of how we have learned together.”

Several more specific gaps were also mentioned, with members expressing the need for and importance of:

- supervisors who have practical experience of doing research of a similar nature to their own, as well as relevant interests and expertise
- greater recognition of the unique demands and impact of this research
- more support around researcher welfare
- training on researching sensitive topics and project-specific training
- opportunities for peer-to-peer role play and fieldwork rehearsal/practice
- reassurance from supervisors and peers that this research is 'messy' and that there are an array of challenges

"I'm also looking for more specific, practical training."

"It's a real gap and when I've raised it to my fellow PhD students who aren't working specifically on 'sensitive' topics, everyone looks at me like I'm crazy and they're, like, 'haven't you done the introduction to interviewing?'"

Final reflections and acknowledgements

This briefing has provided a summary of the key topics and issues discussed over the course of the OVUN PhD forum. Perhaps most importantly, it has highlighted the value of such a space and how it can positively support PhD students in their doctoral journeys.

We would like to thank all the forum members for their participation and contributions over the last two years. Particular thanks are due to: Anna Hutchings, Charlotte Burrell, Janelle Rabe, Kai Grygier, Marie Nodzenski, Shailesh Kumar, Lynne Cairns, Lottie Howard-Merrill, Gayanthi Hapuarachchi, Lucia Carrieria, Bhavya Jain, and Vidya Reddy. We look forward to continued collaborations in the future.

Special thanks are also due to our guest speakers, Professor Pat Dolan, Professor Jenny Pearce, Professor Helen Beckett, and Professor Kati Maternowska, for their inputs and expertise.

For more information about the Our Voices programme and resources, please visit: our-voices.org.uk. You can also email claire.soares@beds.ac.uk and claire.cody@beds.ac.uk

Please visit beds.ac.uk/sylrc for further information about the Safer Young Lives Research Centre (SYLRC). You can also email SYLRC@beds.ac.uk

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