

Moving towards equitable relationships

Considerations for researchers when working with service providers to engage young people in participatory projects addressing sexual violence against children.

'The researcher is a guest, and I only wish the researcher would understand that'

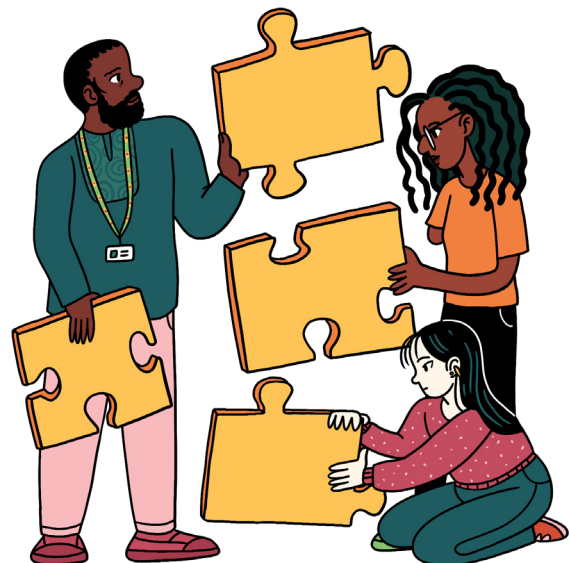
This paper is aimed at researchers who are wishing to develop participatory projects involving children and young people who have experienced sexual violence. It is also of relevance to service providers¹ who are working with researchers on such projects.

The paper is based on a series of online discussions, facilitated by researchers from the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at the University of Bedfordshire, with a group of experienced researchers and practitioners.

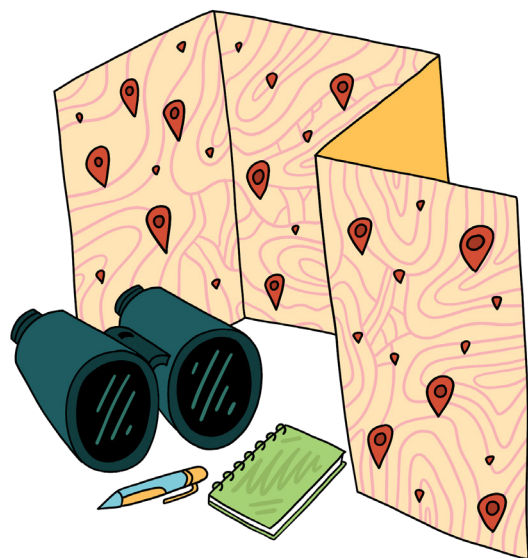
The online discussions explored what equitable relationships between service providers and researchers should look like, in the context of participatory projects that involve children and young people who have experienced sexual violence. Conversations considered: how power differentials impact this work; areas where it would be helpful for researchers and service

providers to have deeper discussions; and what could change for achieving more equitable relationships.

Key themes from the discussions (and subsequent input from participants) are presented below for others to consider when undertaking projects of this nature.



¹ By 'service providers' we mean services/professionals who are working directly with young people. In a participatory project they may be called other names such as 'facilitating partner' or 'implementing partner'.



Mapping out stakeholders

Map out all the different bodies and organisations involved in the project, to understand the different relationships between them and where shared decision-making is possible.

There are often various bodies involved in participatory projects, with varying degrees of involvement. For example, donors, grant holders, academic partners, service providers, young people, and parents. It can be helpful to map out the different relationships involved in the project and consider who holds power and where power imbalances could potentially be addressed or minimised. It is important that everyone involved is clear about their role, what is expected of them, and what they should expect from others.

Language

Take the time to think about the language being used to describe the relationships between those involved.

Certain terminology may come with connotations. People may have different feelings about certain terms based on their experience, culture or professional backgrounds. For example, the language of 'partners', for some may infer equal and joint decision-making which may not be reflective of the relationship.

Partnerships between researchers and service providers are unlikely to be truly equal. Researchers typically develop the research aims and plans in the first instance and often have access to resources that render them the 'decision-makers'. This doesn't necessarily mean that terms such as 'partnership' should be avoided. It also doesn't mean that relationships can only be 'equitable' if all parties are playing an equal role. Partnerships should aim to be as collaborative as possible; having open conversations and striving for working relationships where the exchange feels fair and where everyone's contribution is valued and understood.

In some cases, it may be helpful to use terms that are more descriptive and signal the role of each party. For example, specifying 'implementing partner' or 'research partner' to represent what each organisation is leading on, may be preferable.

'The language may not be a problem, but [it's] how we internalise it and use it'

Joint planning

Find ways to create and promote space for project partners to input into planning discussions.

Project funding models and timelines can limit opportunities to consult or co-design projects with service providers at the early concept stage. This makes it more important to find other ways to bring in the prior learning and expertise of partners once the project is underway.

Often researchers assume that engagement in a project will be beneficial to the service providers they are working with. Yet, this is rarely discussed or explored with those services. Developing equitable relationships with partners in this context means building in time to explore what they may need or want from the collaboration and creating a shared goal and understanding of the research.

This principle extends to the young people who are potentially going to be involved. Where possible, giving young people opportunities to have their say about what they need or want from the project, or what might be helpful from their perspective, not only aligns with participatory practice but may also help to build more equitable relationships between researchers and service providers, as they work towards a shared goal.

'There's much more we can learn about how to give partners, but also young people, more spaces to kind of think about and say what they need out of this project financially but also otherwise. Because if we're the grant holders, the academic partner, we are in a very powerful seat and quite often you know we operate in an environment where funders and ethics committees kind of dictate.'



Minimising negative impacts

Consider how to minimise disruption for partner organisations and cultivate a flexible and responsive approach to working.

For service providers engaged in the project, having a researcher visit or work with their staff and the young people they work with, can disrupt their regular rhythm of working. This is particularly so when projects require more sustained engagement – as is often the case with participatory research. It is important to recognise this and the potential impact of your presence. While it may not be possible to avoid disruption altogether, researchers should consider how it can be minimised.

In addition to minimising disruption, researchers should also consider how the research or activity can support benefits and positive outcomes for both the service and the young people. In thinking about how the young people and organisation may feel at the end of the project, thought should be given to what issues young people or services may be left 'holding' that they weren't before (and how this can be addressed), as well as what benefits they may walk away with through their involvement and how these can be promoted throughout.

Open lines of communication and feedback loops throughout the process can foster a more positive experience for all. Create opportunities for all parties to share what is going well and what could be done better or differently and take a flexible approach, making changes to plans and design as needed.

'...Whether it is the organisation, whether it is the young people...We need to think about that.... When we are done, how have we left them?'



'We learned better together with our partners and young people ... what are we doing well? What can we do better and what can we do next? I think as long as we keep asking those questions to ourselves and to the people, we are working with, I think that shows the essence of a partnership if we take all our views on board and then we use that for improvement. I think that is the equitable part, even if there's those power dynamics as well, they know that the decisions being made take their views into account. I think that's already a good starting point.'

Positionality

Continuously reflect on your position and role in the process – respecting and recognising the expertise of those working with and for local organisations.

Researchers are typically visiting or engaging service providers for a set period of time. They are 'guests' that have been invited into the space. They are often dependent on the organisations providing access to young people and supporting their work. Researchers should respect organisations, welcome and utilise their expertise, and consider how the work will benefit these organisations and the groups and communities they are working with.

Researchers should also be mindful of the context they are working in – that services are supporting young people impacted by sexual violence, and as such are often dealing with crisis situations and juggling multiple demands. Their prioritisation of this essential work should be acknowledged and respected.

'There has to be some recognition of the expertise of the agency...these are the people who are working in this local situation. They understand it better. The same applies to the young people who are involved.'

'The researcher is kind of like a pair of glasses, which is useless without the eyes. The participants, young people and the agency that is working with them are the pair of eyes... what you do (as the researcher) is to provide the light, the focus, so that those who are involved could see better. And maybe do better about the situation.'



Know the context

Take the time to build understanding of the local context, rather than make assumptions.

There is a tendency to 'parachute' researchers into a community to collect data – particularly when working on international projects. If researchers have limited understanding of that community and its complexities, the data may be distorted or misinterpreted and not situated within the wider context.

While it can take time to understand an environment, it is an important investment to make for creating better partnerships and relationships, and for gleaning higher quality, more meaningful data.

'The situations of the implementers is more complex than what we see, you know, sometimes you need to be there for a while to understand what is actually [going on].'

Adding value

Think about what you can offer or contribute to those you are working with that may be of value.

In participatory projects, service providers involved may value tools and new ideas for activities and working creatively with young people. They may also appreciate having an 'external' colleague coming in to open up conversations with young people about a particular topic related to sexual violence.

In participatory projects, or those that involve ethnographic or embedded techniques, researchers may be able to act as an 'additional pair of hands' helping other staff members whilst simultaneously building trust and rapport with them and the young people.

Researchers should also consider things like:

- how the research might inform wider service-development, training or resources that will be helpful for the organisation
- how the learning and/or experience might benefit or improve things for other young people in that community or context
- how the project might create space for young people to share their aspirations for the work
- what opportunities there might be to connect and communicate with other young people.

It may be that researchers are able to provide local partners with access to training that supports their professional development or provide access to resources or materials – either directly via their institutions/organisations or by cascading information.

Reflective practice

Create time and space to reflect collaboratively with those involved on learnings from the project and the implications of these.

Service providers involved in projects can find it helpful to pause and reflect on the work that they do, think about how things might be done differently, or how they might be able to share their learning with others. Researchers can help organisations to do this and ensure time is carved out during or at the end of a project to support this thinking and discussion.

It can also be valuable to spend time at the end of projects gathering views about what those involved (including young people) might like to explore in future projects, so this can be fed into new project concepts when the opportunity arises. It may be beneficial to do this given the limited time and resources for consulting with prospective partners about what they would like a new project to focus on, at the point of submitting new project proposals.

Similarly, researchers often move from one project to the next and don't always pause and reflect on the learning and implications once each is complete, and what lessons can be carried forward. Building in time to document this can support innovation and improvements in future projects.

'I feel like we don't utilise those opportunities actually right at the end of a project to at least gather some insight about what might be helpful for another project in the future....So we have them in our back pocket for when another bid comes along.'

'Actually having these conversations are so important because as long as we are like cognisant about what we are doing, we can plan better, we can, you know, integrate and be youth centred.'

Making the case for more equitable partnerships

Document the value that developing and nurturing equitable partnerships brings to participatory projects that aim to explore sexual violence against children.

Establishing and nurturing effective, equitable partnerships with service providers working with children and young people who have experienced sexual violence takes time but investing in them adds value to all involved and, ultimately, to the quality and outputs of the research. Researchers and partners should aim to capture the learning and evidence around the importance and value these partnerships bring and document the time and resources required to nurture these relationships. This can help showcase to funders (and prospective partners) what this work involves and why.

'I do think we can make a case that doing the legwork and building on partnerships really pays off in the long run ... I think we do need to make that case and we do have a lobbying role as well towards [funders].'



Acknowledgements

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