

The challenges and opportunities of conducting PhD participatory action research on sensitive issues: Young people and sexting

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cse**Leanne York** 

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, UK

Alison MacKenzie

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, UK

Noel Purdy

Department of Teacher Education, Stranmillis University College, Belfast, UK

Abstract

This paper presents the challenges and opportunities of using a participatory action research (PAR) methodology in a social science PhD exploring young people's attitudes to sexting in Northern Ireland. Based upon a children's rights approach, a Young People's Advisory Group (YPAG) was created to seek advice on data collection activities and resources to be used with the participants of the research. Single-sex and mixed-sex focus group interviews were conducted in one youth club with 17 young people. PAR provides opportunities for young people to voice their views on matters affecting their lives, and supports the development of interpersonal, teamworking and research skills. Challenges of PAR included recruiting young people, gaining consent from young people and parents. This study highlights the importance of including young people as co-researchers. As a result of the method used, young people confirmed that Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is inadequate.

Keywords

sexting, young people's advisory group, participatory research, children's rights, focus group interviews, social science research

Corresponding author:

Leanne York, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, 69-71 University Street, Belfast, BT7 1HL, UK.

Email: lyork01@qub.ac.uk

Introduction

Mobile technologies, such as internet accessible mobile phones and tablet computers, have almost everywhere resulted in easier access to the internet. This has, unsurprisingly, resulted in high ownership of such devices amongst young people (Ofcom, 2020; Purdy and York, 2016). However, the popularity of online technology has resulted in concerns about their online safety, particularly in relation to activities such as sexting which can potentially result in negative consequences, including legal repercussions for young people aged under 18 (Childnet International, 2018; Jørgensen et al., 2019).

In Northern Ireland, conservative Christian values influence what is taught to young people in relation to Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), and there is a reluctance amongst some teachers to discuss such issues (Rolston et al., 2005). Parental influence also impacts on what is taught to young people in relation to RSE, as was illustrated in 2020 when RSE lessons were not taught in a primary school after parents objected to the lesson content (Meredith, 2020). There is societal discomfort about young people and sexting ‘based on moral anxieties’ because sexting activity is deemed to be harmful (Jørgensen et al., 2019: 26). Sexting appears to be highly prevalent and widely reported, yet so little seems to be known about the phenomenon, at least in Northern Ireland where it remains an unexplored issue.

Though sexting and young people are often in media headlines, rarely are young people asked for their opinions about such contemporary issues. Moore et al. (2016) assert that young people should be viewed as experts on issues affecting them and who can provide different perspectives on a topic previously not considered by adults. To address this gap, the first author, a PhD student at the time, with her supervisors¹ developed a research design to provide young people in Northern Ireland with an opportunity to have their voices heard, and to explore how they themselves understand sexting (or ‘dirts’ and ‘nudes’ as they called them in this research). In the research, we took sexting to mean ‘the creation and transmission of sexual images by minors’ (Lounsbury et al., 2011: 1), whether consensual or non-consensual (and see Lloyd, 2020). We decided to adopt a children’s rights approach and to use a participatory research methodology which involved, first, the creation of a school-based Young People’s Advisory Group (YPAG) in February and March, 2018, to work in partnership with, and advise us on how to research such a sensitive topic with young people. As we will report here, this methodology presented a number of challenges, including the recruitment of young people, gaining consent, overcoming misunderstanding by school management about the role of YPAGs and the topic itself – sexting, which inhibited the recruitment of young people from schools. Because recruitment in schools was so low, on the suggestion of the third author (and second supervisor), we decided to switch from schools to youth clubs where a Young People’s Participatory Group (YPPG) was formed. They were asked to respond to a number of participatory methods: vignettes describing sexting situations; sexually suggestive pictures of adolescents; and a widely used school-based video resource on sexting called ‘Megan’s Story’ (for a detailed account of these resources and young people’s response to them, see York et al., 2021).

In this paper, we will report on the challenges of this method in a PhD study but will place the analytical emphasis on researching sensitive topics in a still predominantly conservative society and school system. Next, we discuss why researching with young people is integral to respecting the aims and aspirations of child’s rights protocols, specifically the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Lundy’s (2007) seminal model of child participation.

Researching with young people: Respecting the voice of the child

According to Darbyshire et al. (2005), children and young people are not considered to be competent research participants because of their lack of maturity. Children and young people were, and still are, regarded as 'passive subjects' whose views were thought to be unimportant on issues affecting them (Hazel, 1995: 1). Research was carried out 'on children, rather than with children' (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010: 1). The early 1990s signalled a change in the rights of children with the introduction of the UNCRC, applicable to all children and young people under the age of 18 (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015; Lundy et al., 2011). Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015) assert that because of the UNCRC all children and young people should be 'respected as persons in their own right', acknowledging that children are 'active members' of their family, community and society who have 'concerns, interests and points of view'. This view is also shared by Freeman (1996: 37) who suggests that the UNCRC is important as it 'recognises the child as a full human being with integrity and personality and the ability to participate freely in society'. Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children and young people have the 'right to express their views freely and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity' (Lundy et al., 2011: 715). Indeed, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the body responsible for monitoring compliance with the UNCRC, highlights that this right should be 'anchored in the child's daily life . . . including through research and consultation' (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, cited in Emerson et al., 2014: 31). Children and young people possess the right to have their views and opinions on matters affecting them incorporated into research, and for these to be listened to in a sincere manner (Lansdown, 2011). Children and young people are now recognised as being experts on issues impacting upon their lives (Bergström et al., 2010; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010).

Lundy (2007: 933) in her model of child participation refers to 'space – children must be given the opportunity to express a view' (as well as 'voice – children must be facilitated to express their views', 'audience – the view must be listened to' and 'influence – the view must be acted upon, as appropriate'), and states that Article 12 expects States to 'assure' young people of the right to communicate their views, with a concomitant commitment to actively encourage young people to discuss their opinions. Young people should be invited to talk about issues that are important to them and this space ought to be 'inclusive' (p. 934).

Lundy et al. (2011) state that because children and young people have the right to communicate their views on all issues affecting their lives and to be listened to in a sincere manner does not mean that young people can only be research participants. Article 12 of the UNCRC encompasses the whole research activity and, according to Lundy et al. (2011), there has been a tendency to involve children and young people as co-researchers. Young people can demonstrate their competence as co-researchers at various stages of the research process ranging from helping to decide on data collection methods to data collection and interpretation of the findings (Coad and Evans, 2008; Gray and Winter, 2011). Such participation can help young people develop research, teamworking and interpersonal skills, become confident in their own decision making, create a sense of achievement at being part of a research team, while having their opinions and ideas listened to and valued (Davis, 2009; O'Brien and Dadswell, 2020). In accordance with the aspirations of the UNCRC and our belief that young people are competent to speak on issues that affect them, we created a YPAG. YPAGs have been used in numerous research studies exploring a range of sensitive issues such as bullying, sexual consent and producing sexuality and relationships educational materials (Johnson et al., 2020; O'Brien and Dadswell, 2020; Whittington, 2019).

The lives of children and young people are mainly dominated by adults (Punch, 2002a). There was a risk of an unequal power relationship between the young people and the researcher because of 'age, status, competency and experience' which can be difficult to eliminate (Einarsdóttir, 2007:

204). Indeed, Mayall (2000) asserts that such power imbalances are unavoidable, and it is the researcher's role to treat young people respectfully as experts. During the informed consent session with potential YPAG participants and subsequent meetings with the YPAG, the researcher emphasised that she was asking them to help her design the research; that she was, further, interested in seeking their advice and suggestions as co-researchers about activities that would be used with young people as they are the experts on issues affecting their peers, as well as on the terminology used by teenagers (such as 'dirts' and 'nudes', not the formal, adult terminology, 'sexting'). It was explained that they would not be asked about their personal sexting habits, as it was their views on and attitudes to sexting that were of critical research importance. Participatory language (space, voice, audience and influence), according to Gibson (2012), demonstrates that the researcher is sincere about finding out and listening to the opinions of young people. Young people usually take pleasure in being treated as experts and are normally keen to participate (Sinner et al., 2008). In participatory research (as in any kind of research), it is important that young people know what the purpose of the meetings are, why they are being asked for their advice or are being interviewed which will help build trust and create an environment in which they feel they can give honest opinions and views (Conroy and Harcourt, 2009). Trust can also be encouraged by the researcher rejecting a 'formal role' and creating, instead, a friendly informal environment for meetings to take place where the researcher and participants are partners working together (Jordan, 2006, cited in Gibson, 2012: 154). This is especially the case when the topics under discussion are sensitive and not normally discussed with adults such as teachers and parents. It is important, therefore, that the researcher is friendly and comfortable with sharing information about themselves and shows their interest in learning from young people (Gibson, 2012; Tisdall et al., 2009).

Young people are not, perhaps, used to the idea of adults asking them for their views and opinions, particularly on issues such as sexting. They may attempt to give answers that they think are correct and pleasing to the researcher, resulting in them feeling that they cannot voice their true opinions (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Punch, 2002a). It was made clear to the school-based YPAG and the youth-club based YPPGs that there were no correct or incorrect responses to the activities or vignette questions, and that they should, as far as possible, answer freely and honestly without fear of disapproval.

Participant recruitment: Young People's Participation Groups (YPPGs) – schools

Once the YPAG agreed on the activities, the next stage was to recruit participants. An invitation letter was sent to the principals of two grammar (non-fee paying, selective, post-primary) schools inviting their school to participate and both agreed. Other kinds of schools (e.g. non-selective, integrated) were not contacted because of the complexity in comparing across schools, age and religion. The education system in Northern Ireland is complex. Schools fall under a range of management types and denominational affiliations, including the (predominantly Protestant) Controlled sector, the (predominantly Catholic) Maintained sector, the Integrated sector (where children from Protestant, Catholic and other/no faith backgrounds are educated together) and a small but growing Irish medium sector (see DE, 2021). Unlike most other parts of the UK, academic selection has been retained across most areas of Northern Ireland. While regulated transfer tests were withdrawn in 2008, most grammar schools have continued to select pupils for admission on the basis of unregulated tests administered by the Association for Quality Education (AQE) and the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC). In any case, recruiting schools to participate in research can be difficult because Northern Ireland is a small region and very many schools have been heavily involved in research.

The researcher spoke to a full year group of Year 11 pupils (aged 14–15) at the informed consent session in both schools in order to have a better chance of getting high numbers of young people and their parents to give consent. The response rate, however, was very low. In the first school, only three out of a total of 214 pupils gave consent and parental consent to participate in the YPPGs. None agreed in the second school.

Participant recruitment: Young People’s Participation Groups (YPPGs) – youth club

One reason for the very low response rate from the pupils may have been their reluctance to discuss sexting in a school environment. As discussed earlier, Northern Ireland is still a conservative society and the word ‘sexting’ was used several times in the consent letters. We therefore decided to use other terms to describe sexting. These included ‘online distribution of inappropriate pictures’ or ‘sharing of suggestive pictures online’. We also decided to contact youth clubs whose informal environments might encourage young people to talk more openly about sensitive topics. We contacted the leaders of four youth clubs and one of the leaders agreed to participate. We also decided to extend the age group from 14–15 to 14–17 as the youth club had a small number of young people attending who were in Year 11 at school.

The participating youth club was not associated with any church or religious organisations. It is located in an urban area of social deprivation and operates on a weekly basis. We had discussed recruiting a second youth club but because of the depth and honesty of the responses from the young people, we agreed that recruiting young people from another youth club was unlikely to yield new information.

In total, 35 young people attended the informed consent session. Ten girls and seven boys (aged 16–17 years) gave consent.

The role of supportive gatekeepers or ‘adult allies’ (Johnson et al., 2020: 15) is important in several areas such as granting access to the potential research setting and supporting recruitment (O’Brien and Dadswell, 2020). The supportive gatekeeper for our study was the youth club leader who was very welcoming of the research and realised the importance of young people being given the chance to express their views and opinions on sexting, and that young people are the experts on issues affecting their generation. Unlike the school, the youth club leader placed no time limits on meetings.

During the focus group meetings, the researcher asked the young people if they would have participated in the study had it taken place in their school. The response from them was ‘no’. There were various reasons for this which included ‘*it is too formal and too awkward*’; ‘*we would feel we couldn’t talk openly*’. This is because schools do not openly discuss issues such as sexting as the following participants explained:

Blue² (f): *Schools don’t really want to tell us things and they try and avoid it.*

Lion Bar (m): *Personally, and this is maybe me just being cynical, when our school does it you just think “they are doing it to tick a box”. It is, like, they have got a policy on it and it is a very strict policy of “don’t do it” and if it does happen then it is “we told you not to do it”.*

Such comments illustrate the power dynamics that operate between adults and young people within the formal school environment where young people did not feel they could talk in an open and honest manner about sexting, in stark contrast to the informal environment of the youth club.

Focus group interviews with young people

Part of the researcher's discussion with the YPAG involved discussing how she could carry out the activities with other young people. They suggested that young people would probably feel more comfortable in a group. Based on this advice, we used focus group interviews with the YPPGs: four single-sex focus group interviews (two interviews with the girls and two with the boys) and one mixed-sex focus group.

O'Brien and Dadswell (2020) assert that focus groups are often regarded as a traditional research method. However, according to Gallagher (2008), it is the interaction of the young people within the focus groups in co-producing knowledge, in this case their attitudes towards sexting, that can be considered participatory. Focus group interviews can be used to collect data on sensitive issues, and have been used in previous research studies exploring sexual issues with young people (van Teijlingen et al., 2007). This type of interview was also chosen over individual interviews because young people are less likely to feel 'intimidated' in a group setting (Lewis, 1992: 416). Many researchers organise focus group interviews on the basis of friendship groups (Green and Hart, 1999). The YPPG participants already knew each other and we were using research activities based on images, a video clip and short story which allowed the young people to focus on these rather than on themselves. Their commentaries were based on their experiences.

Given the sensitive nature of sexting, separate focus group interviews were used for girls and boys to enable discussion of 'gendered issues without pressure' (Davidson, 2014: 7). As well as conducting single-sex focus groups, a mixed-sex group was also arranged. Both the girls and boys who had consented to and participated in the single-sex groups were very keen to discuss the vignettes with members of the opposite sex. During the mixed-sex session, as well as listening to their responses, their physical behaviours were observed by the researcher. Both the girls and boys were quieter than they had been in the single-sex groups, but the boys did talk more than the girls (see Baxter, 2002, for a discussion on how boys dominate discussion in the classroom). The responses to the vignette questions were similar to those given in the single-sex group interviews.

Using vignettes in focus groups with young people

As sexting is a sensitive topic, the focus group interviews were based on age-appropriate vignettes to promote discussion. Vignettes are 'short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond' (Finch, 1987: 105). In a review of different interview techniques that can be used with young people, Punch (2002b) concluded that visual vignettes are popular with young people. The visual vignette was an educational short film entitled 'Megan's Story' (available on YouTube³). It focuses on a girl who takes a picture of herself in school and sends it to a boy. The story continues with the picture being distributed to Megan's peers and teacher during a lesson (see York et al., 2021, for a critique on the assumptions of the film). Because we were unable to find a similar film for boys, the researcher self-authored a short age-appropriate vignette entitled 'Peter's Story'. This vignette is about a teenage boy who pressurises his girlfriend (Jessica) to send him a picture. When she finally submits to the pressure, Peter distributes the picture to his male friends who send it to others and the relationship ends. Peter does not believe he is to blame because Jessica did not have to send him a picture.

Both vignettes were used in the single and mixed-sex focus groups. An advantage of vignettes, according to Hughes (1998: 383), is that they enable participants to discuss topics within the scenario from a 'non-personal and therefore less-threatening perspective', and have been used in previous research studies with young people when exploring topics such as 'sexual standards' (Noble-Carr, 2006; Tisdall et al., 2009). A limitation of the vignette is that it can be difficult to

decipher whether a participant's response to what a fictional character should do in response to a specific issue mirrors what they themselves would do if they were in a similar situation (Barter and Renold, 2000). However, the focus of the study was on attitudes to sexting rather than on behaviours of the young people themselves.

When constructing the vignettes, internal validity was considered in terms of how it specifically helped address the research questions. The researcher carefully considered the content, given that Hughes and Huby (2004) assert that vignettes must be realistic if they are to attract and hold the interest of the young people. The YPAG thought that whilst there were parts of Megan's Story that were unrealistic, such as the teacher being sent the picture of Megan, they did agree that, in certain circumstances, pupils could have a teacher's mobile phone number and that the teacher could be sent the picture through a group chat. Though the film was not, in the YPAG's view, realistic, the researcher was interested to hear their views as the film was produced as an educational resource to educate young people about the dangers of sexting. The YPAG agreed that both vignettes should be used with the YPPGs. In exploring young peoples' attitudes to the vignettes, the researcher used open-ended questions to help prevent them giving one-word answers (Greig and Taylor, 1999). Another consideration was the order of the questions. Fargas-Malet et al. (2010) report that, when researching sensitive issues, less difficult questions should be asked first to help put young people at ease and build confidence. Swords (2002, cited in Noble-Carr, 2006: 31) recommends using no more than four core questions in a focus group. The vignettes for this study each had more questions than this; Megan's Story comprised five questions while Peter's Story consisted of seven questions to enable adequate discussion of the issues raised in the vignettes. The researcher sought the advice of the YPAG who were satisfied with the number of questions for each of the vignettes.

Ethical considerations

Permission to perform this research study was granted by the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work (SSESW) Ethics Committee, at Queen's University Belfast.

Children and young people are generally viewed as being more vulnerable than, and therefore in need of being protected from adults (Gallagher, 2009; Johnson et al., 2019). Balen et al. (2006, cited in Gallagher, 2009: 13) assert that many take the view that such detailed analysis of research proposals by ethics committees result in better protection for children and young people. Such scrutiny can impact upon what ethics committees deem to be 'appropriate research' with young people and potential risks to them of participating in research that perhaps challenge traditional views and attitudes in relation to sensitive issues (Johnson et al., 2019: 4). The notion that young people need to be protected by adults can conflict with treating young people as 'competent social actors' (James et al., 1998, cited in Gallagher, 2009: 14). Johnson et al. (2019) report that because they could not fully specify to their ethics committee what they would be doing in terms of their participatory design approach, that their first application was rejected. The researchers had to submit detailed plans of the research activities before ethical approval could be granted. We did not experience these difficulties because our University has a world-leading children's rights centre that advocates the use of participatory research methods. The ethics committee of the researchers' School contains members familiar with PAR, and the application went through with minor amendments.

Some academics may not view PAR as a legitimate methodology (Klocker, 2012). This was the not the experience of the researcher, as the supervisory team for this study (second and third authors) and her examiners had experience of PAR and children's rights and did not, therefore, deprecate the knowledge produced by this PAR PhD. This emphasises the importance of selecting suitable supervisors and examiners who have experience and knowledge of the methodology being used (Maguire, 1993, cited in Klocker, 2012: 155).

When research involves young people, gaining consent will usually involve contacting and seeking permission from those adults who are responsible for the potential research participants. Morrow (1999, cited in Punch, 2002a: 329) suggests that researchers co-operate with the gatekeepers to develop mutual trust throughout the study. Indeed, the provision of written details of the research plan assists in developing such a relationship prior to obtaining consent (Bell, 2010). In addition, explanation of the study was carefully considered to avoid potential alarm caused by the term 'sexting'. In the letters to school principals, parents and youth club leaders the context of the study was related to the appropriate area of the curriculum where young people are given the opportunity to explore various sensitive issues such as sexting (Northern Ireland Curriculum, 2011).

Even though Article 12 of the UNCRC details that young people have the right for their views to be heard, this does not mean that young people have to express their opinions. As Lundy (2007) asserts, some young people may not wish to do this, and their decision should be respected. Young people need to be made aware of, and reminded that, their participation is voluntary, and consent can be withdrawn at any time (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). The YPAG and YPPGs were reminded of this at each of the meetings.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates the challenges of conducting PAR PhD research of a sensitive nature with young people. The major challenge was getting consent from pupils and parents to participate, even though the schools were welcoming of the research. Despite the schools consenting to participate, pupils and their parents were reluctant to give their consent. This may have been for various reasons such as not wishing to discuss a sensitive topic such as sexting in the school environment or because the young people may have been preoccupied with school exams which would have been taking place during the data collection period. The word 'sexting' may also have been a deterrent.

These constraints highlight the need for flexibility when conducting participatory research of a sensitive nature with young people. The researcher had, for example, initially planned for only single-sex focus group interviews, but decided to have a mixed-sex group after the young people expressed their wishes to discuss these issues with members of the opposite sex. Schools, we learned, may not always be the best option for accessing young people, particularly when the research topic is sensitive. The young people explained that they wanted to talk about issues such as sexting but that in the formal environment of the school they are 'talked to'. They voiced their preference for a more informal conversational approach. The young people also appreciated the opportunity to express their opinions and agreed that teenagers should be able to provide feedback on and assist with, for example, the planning of RSE teaching resources. A co-participatory approach could therefore be beneficial when educators are planning educational resources.

The YPAG and their advice was invaluable in relation to data collection activities and more practical issues and emphasises the important role young people can play as co-researchers, whilst also providing them with the experience of being part of a research team and the development of various skills. Sexting is an issue that may affect young people at some point in their lives. As a result of this methodology, the young people confirmed that RSE lacks detail and is unrealistic.

Even though challenges were experienced in conducting this PhD, the discussion in this paper may give other students considering a similar methodology some insight as to why the researcher experienced these challenges, and how they were addressed in order to give young people their voice in relation to sexting.

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ORCID iD

Leanne York  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4966-2673>

Notes

1. The first and second supervisors are named as authors on the paper for two main reasons: they were actively involved in the design of the research and contributed to the writing of the paper. The university of the second author has also adopted the Vancouver Recommendations on authorship (2019). We refer to ‘the researcher’ when describing situations when it was the first author only who met with the YPAG and collected data from the youth club.
2. The participants chose their own pseudonyms.
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bStezpLKxLc>

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