



ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

Centre for Children
and Young People



Childwatch
INTERNATIONAL
RESEARCH NETWORK

unicef 
Office of Research

UNIVERSITY
of
OTAGO

Te Whare Wānanga o Ōtago
NEW ZEALAND

INFORMED CONSENT

Obtaining informed and voluntary consent in a group context

Background context:

In designing a doctoral research study of the experiences of unaccompanied/ separated asylum seeking young people in Ireland, it was decided that the core of the study would involve individual interviews with relevant young people, aged between 13 and 18 years. From the beginning it was recognised that, by virtue of their status and prior experiences, some of the young people who met the inclusion criteria for the sample might be suspicious or sceptical of the true intent behind social research and that this was likely to impact on their engagement with the study and the quality of the data gathered. While in some ways this group differ from other young people, in other ways their suspicion and scepticism might reflect the views of other potential participants of a similar age, albeit of a different background, particularly those who are considered vulnerable for various reasons. While this discussion relates to a specific population, it is likely that it is also relevant to research in a group context more generally.

It was clear from the outset that the study faced a number of issues. The first issue was how to build trust in young people whose basis for trust in other people, especially people in authority, had been severely tested by prior experiences (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). While the study was focused on their experience since arriving in Ireland, a further sensitive issue was the frequently uncertain immigration status of many of the young people which also made them wary of questions about their lives. Therefore, it was thought that they might feel powerless when faced with 'options' presented by authority figures. Another issue was that a single interview was unlikely to be able to do justice to the complexity and range of experiences encountered by the young people. It was felt that an additional method was needed so that the researcher could develop a more in-depth understanding of the everyday lives and circumstances of the young people. Thus, it was decided to undertake participant observation in a hostel accommodating separated young people, prior to commencing interviews. The authority responsible for placing the young people in the hostel was approached and permission was granted to conduct the participant observation.

The ethical challenge:

The main ethical challenge posed by the research was that of obtaining informed and voluntary consent from the participants. This is particularly relevant in research with young people as they might construct the researcher as an authority figure to whom they must defer (Mahon et al., 1996), perhaps even more so in the case of asylum seeking young people because of a range of issues (see Hopkins, 2008), including their uncertain immigration status. In addition, obtaining informed consent can be particularly complex in situations where participant observation is used. We recognised that individuals might have different reactions to the researcher being in the hostel. Should the researcher seek the unanimous consent of the whole group of young residents, meaning in effect that

even one or two dissenting views could veto the whole project, despite perhaps strong interest in participation on the part of others, and possibly even a majority? We wanted to respect the rights of each young person. The rights of some unaccompanied minors not to participate were of course important. However, we felt that others might be enthusiastic about the research and that they had as much right to be allowed to participate as did others to refuse participation.

Choices made:

It was decided that if a significant majority were in favour of the research going ahead it would continue. However, those not wanting to participate needed to be accommodated also. For this reason informed consent from the young people was sought on two separate issues. In order to move forward in a way that sought to balance the rights of both potential groups, the 'consenters' and 'non-consenters', the researchers framed the process in two parts: The first related to the researcher's presence in the hostel, whilst the second related to the actual participation of the young people in the research process. We recognised that whilst a young person might not mind the researcher (Muireann) being in the hostel, he or she might not want her to be gathering information in relation to him or her. Therefore, consent to the first did not imply consent to the second. Arising from this differentiation, Figure 1 (Ní Raghallaigh, 2006) illustrates the potential combination of responses that the young people could give when the researcher sought their consent.

Figure 1: Illustration of responses from potential participants in relation to their participation in the research and to the presence of the researcher in the hostel



Verbal agreement to the researcher's presence in the hostel was obtained from all young people. Written consent to participate was obtained from a majority. It was made clear in each one-to-one discussion about consent that data would only be gathered and included in relation to those who had given explicit consent to presence and participation. The researcher would discard data involving young people who had not consented to active participation: she promised that she would not write field notes about them. Consent was revisited at different stages throughout the fieldwork, for example, when the researcher felt that young people might have tired of her presence or when new young people arrived in the hostel. Some young people who had originally only consented to the researcher's presence, changed their minds and stated that they wanted to be interviewed, perhaps because a relationship with the researcher had developed. Other young people, who had originally consented to presence and participation, subsequently decided that they did not wish to be interviewed but they were still happy for Muireann to spend time in the hostel.

Reflexive questions/considerations:

When conducting group research, do we neglect the rights of some individuals if we decide that unanimous consent must be obtained from the whole group? In our view, the answer is 'yes', and therefore a different approach must be used. While the consent process in our study was a very complex one, the researchers are of the belief that this complexity was necessary given what they wanted to do: spend time in what was the young people's current home in Ireland. As such, respecting their rights was of ultimate importance. The key in implementing this consent process was time. It was not possible to simply go into the hostel and get consent on a once-off basis. Instead, obtaining consent was considered an on-going process. At the outset, before the fieldwork could begin, it involved several information meetings with the young people, both individually and in groups and the use of various methods (e.g. anonymous comment box; encouraging them to talk to hostel staff or to the researcher) to ascertain their views on the project. Many researchers will say the time spent obtaining consent is a luxury that they cannot afford. Yet, why should this part of the research be rushed or considered a tick the box exercise, when it is of such importance in respecting the rights of the potential participants?

Finally, a question that we continue to ask, a number of years after the research has finished, is the following: Is it ethical to put time into building relationships with vulnerable young people if the primary reason for doing so is to facilitate our research endeavours? In this study, one of the main motivations for conducting participant observation was to build trusting relationships with the young people. These relationships were built, and then, in most cases, they ended once the research had been completed. Is this fair, especially in the case of vulnerable young people who may in many respects be very alone and who may have already experienced multiple losses?

References

- Hopkins, P. (2008). Ethical issues in research with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, *Children's Geographies*, 6 (1), 37 – 48.
- Mahon, A., Glendinning, C., Clarke, K., & Craig, G. (1996). Researching children: methods and ethics. *Children & Society*, 10 (2), 145-154.
- Ní Raghallaigh, M. (2006). *Negotiating changed contexts and challenging circumstances: The*

experiences of unaccompanied minors living in Ireland. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis submitted to the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

Ní Raghallaigh, M., & Gilligan, R. (2010). Active survival in the lives of unaccompanied minors: coping strategies, resilience and the relevance of religion. *Child & Family Social Work, 15*, 226-237.

Contributed by: Dr Muireann Ní Raghallaigh, School of Applied Social Science, University College Dublin, Ireland and Professor Robbie Gilligan, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

The research was part of a Ph.D. study which was funded jointly by the National Children's Office, Dublin, and by the School of Social Work and Social Policy and the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin.