

Research ethics in the Third Sector ...or why one size really doesn't fit all

Simon Anderson (Simon Anderson Consulting/AHRECS)

Dr Amy Calder (YouthLink Scotland)

Research and research ethics in the third sector: how might it be different?

- General concern with values and relationships but no established culture of ethics review (or attention to research ethics more generally)
 - Halo effect?
- Projects typically smaller and timescales shorter than in academia/healthcare
 - Pressure to complete rather than comply?
- Greater proximity to policy and practice and general blurring of functions and roles
 - e.g. researcher/practitioner; research/evaluation/participation/'lived experience'
- But lots of ethically challenging topics and potential vulnerabilities

Our policy and research

We're researching the factors that drive suicide and using it to recommend the policy changes needed to save more lives.



Suicide facts and figures >

We're the only organisation collating suicide data for all UK nations and the Republic of Ireland.



Our latest work >

Read and download our most recent reports, briefings and research.



National and local suicide prevention plans >

We're working with governments across the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Case study: Samaritans

- Longstanding commitment to research and evidence use
- Formal research agenda, but also lots of 'research-like' activities
- Basic research ethics policy since around 2009
- Revised policy in 2018 and introduction of Samaritans Research Ethics Board – with commitment to review
- AHRECS review and agreed 'blueprint' in 2021

What was working well

- Clear organisational commitment to values-based policy and practice
- Scale of the organisation allowed person-to-person discussion of ethics issues and challenges
- Responsiveness and quality of advice offered by the research team
- Recruitment of committed, capable reviewers to the SREB, offering effective scrutiny and valued feedback – especially for ‘traditional’ research
- Effective administration and manageable workload for SREB members
- Commitment to reflection and improvement

What was working less well

- Ethics review working less well for new types of projects and ways of working – e.g. ‘Ux’ and service development, comms, marketing
- Relevance of ethics not always clear, and concern about the process being unwieldy, time consuming or unnecessarily restrictive
- Perceived lack of consistency and transparency in decision-making
- ‘Culture gap’ between SREB and non-research staff, and concern about risk aversion
- Risk of research team being seen as imposing ethics on wider organisation – ‘ethics police’ not ‘facilitation champions’



Context

- Senior Researcher at YouthLink Scotland, the national agency for youth work
- Can only gain ethical approval for research when partnering with universities or with other organisations that require it
- In 2021 **Third Sector Research Forum** developed a Guide to Applying Ethical Research Principles



Developing a policy to navigate research and evaluation ethics

- Scottish Government Analytical Exchange programme – to develop a YouthLink Scotland research ethics policy
- Using the language of research and evaluation
- Provides a checklist of ethical considerations
- Sets our expectations when commissioning, conducting and working in partnership on research and evaluation

YouthLink Scotland's Research Ethics Policy

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation, representing more than 160 youth organisations across Scotland, including national (36) sector youth organisations and all 32 local authorities. We champion the role and value of youth work and represent the interests and aspirations of the voluntary and public sector. Our vision is of a nation which values its young people and their contribution to society and that they are supported to achieve their potential. We are an equality conscious organisation and as a sector we place the rights of children and young people at the heart of what we do. Our work encompasses a variety of national programmes, funding streams, working development, research & policy and communications.

At YouthLink Scotland we understand that we have a collective responsibility as a youth work charity to conduct research and evaluation ethically and responsibly. We are dedicated to developing an evidence base for the impact of youth work on the personal, social and educational development of young people in Scotland. We do this through internally commissioned, internally conducted, and working in partnership on high quality research projects, through a range of youth-led research initiatives, and through regular meetings of the Scottish Youth Work Research Steering Group. YouthLink Scotland also regularly conducts evaluation activities through the national programme and supports the youth work sector to both evaluate and demonstrate impact through the national youth work outcomes.

Our approach to research and evaluation at YouthLink Scotland is key to all we do. We consider our internal policies, procedures and protocols and our external facing support to the youth work sector. It is our intention to lead the sector by example and be a model of how a youth work organisation conducts research ethically.

The following document pulls together evidence from two key sources:

Third Sector Research Forum (2021) Guide to Applying Ethical Research Principles <https://thirdsector.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/03-2021-12-25-Guide-to-applying-ethical-research-principles-for-organisations-pack.pdf>

Social Research Association (2021) Research Ethics Guidance <https://www.sra.ac.uk/content/uploads/2021/05/Research-Ethics-Guidance-2021-05-20-2021-05-20.pdf>

Supporting and reflecting

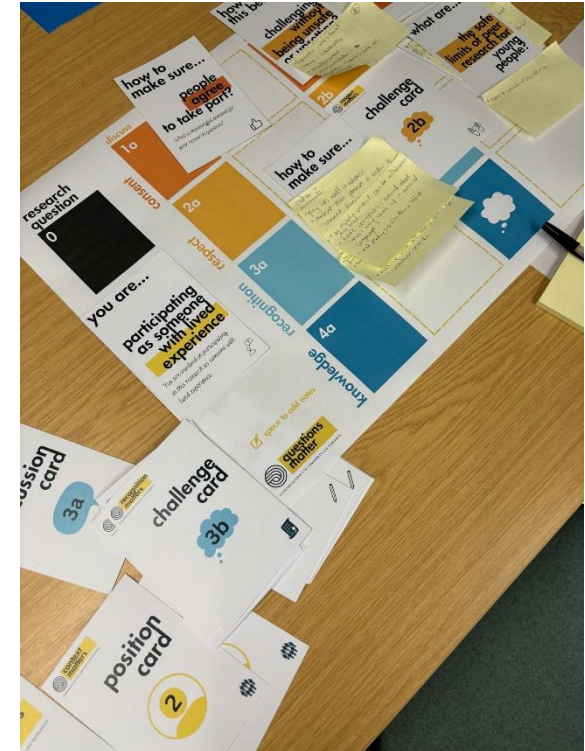
- Research ethics is not just about ethical approval and box ticking
- It's about reflective practice and supporting each other
- Informal research ethics group – for third sector researchers to meet online every 6-8 weeks
- Developing a research ethics appraisal service?



Participatory ethics toolkit

Community Knowledge Matters

- A network that brings together people interested in community-led research shaping practice & policy change in mental health and wellbeing in the H&I and beyond
- Developed a participatory ethics toolkit – prompt conversations around ethical decisions in community-led research



Rights-respecting approach to ethics

- Who gets to set the terms of engagement around research?
- How can we make university ethics processes more accessible and fairer to communities?
- How can we develop ethics processes outside of universities that community-based (/peer) researchers can access?
- How can we allow communities to have a say on how they would like to engage with research (ie. the ethical considerations)?



Next steps

- Third sector researchers are adept at navigating ethics
- Avoid the pitfalls of ticking boxes
- Use more relational, reflective and participatory approaches
- Learn the lessons from other sectors
- Develop ethics which ensures that the participants and researchers wellbeing is at the heart



Contacts and links

simon@simonanderson.consulting

ACalder@youthlink.scot

www.ahrecs.com

<https://www.samaritans.org/scotland/about-samaritans/research-policy/>