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

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Scotland
The national agency for youth work

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

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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

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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'

Elements of the blueprint

A whole organisation approach

Professional development and reflective practice

Ensuring a lived experience perspective

Proportional review

Agreeing standard protocols and approaches

Reviewing attitudes towards risk

A whole project approach

Reviewing the size and composition of the SREB

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

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
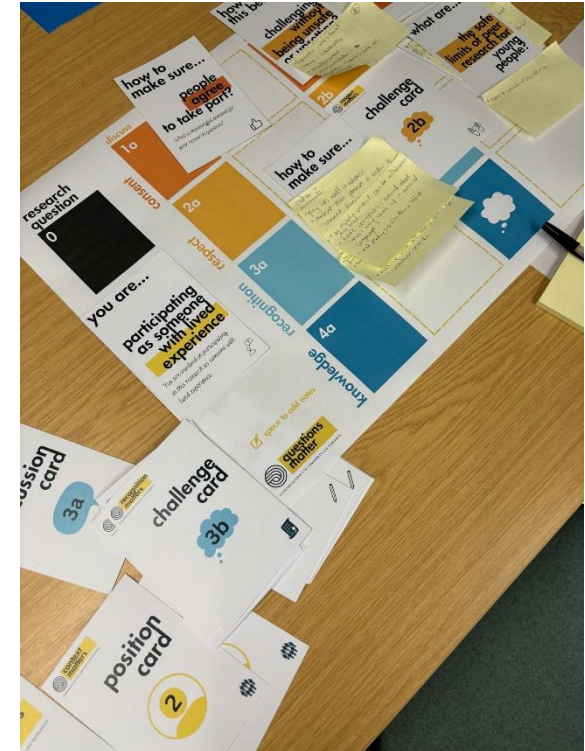
Rights-respecting approach to ethics

- 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

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