



ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

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NEW ZEALAND

PAYMENT AND COMPENSATION

Ethical considerations when using incentives in youth research

Background context:

The Queensland Youth Development Research Project (YDRP) used questionnaires to explore the role of youth development programmes in the positive development of young people, aged 12-18 years. We were interested in gaining a better understanding about the programme features which might contribute to positive developmental outcomes and the well-being of young participants. For our research to have sound outcomes we needed a large number of children from diverse backgrounds to take part, thus we needed to gain the interest and consent of young people and parents, guardians, programme leaders and, when a programme was located in a school, school principals.

The ethical challenge:

We had to decide how we might successfully engage with young people to encourage them to take part in the YDRP. We explored the pros and cons of different incentive options. These ranged from a prize draw with a single or small number of high value prizes or a large number of low value prizes, giving each participant a small pack of nuts or lollies, stickers, pens, pencils, a small token payment and a certificate of appreciation as a reward or 'thank you' for participating. We discussed how we should describe the research project and present information about it so the information would encourage participation (accessible, honest, informative, do-able and appealing) and not act as a disincentive to participation (too much information, too onerous and uninteresting). Above all, we discussed how to make sure our strategy was a balanced one. This involved designing an incentive strategy that would be relevant and attractive to young people but was not coercive, did not apply undue pressure and mediated the differential power relationship between young people and (in the context of this research) adults in their roles as parent, guardian, teacher and programme leader. We discussed how to ensure respect for young people's right to say no or yes to their participation. We debated whether we should keep the gift, payment or reward a secret until each young person finished the questionnaire. We considered how each incentive option might impact on the health, safety and well-being of young people and how different incentives might appeal to particular age and gender groups. How to best encourage and support young people to not skip questions and to complete the questionnaire was also an important consideration in the development of our participation strategy.

Choices made:

We chose a strategy that relied on altruism and interest in the project to gain support and consent from parents, guardians, teachers and programme leaders. We hoped young people would choose to participate because they saw the value of the research. However, we decided to use a mix of incentives to encourage young people to take part

and to recognise the effort of those who chose to do so. We adopted a multifaceted incentive strategy designed to reinforce rather than replace or undercut the intrinsic altruistic motivation of young people to participate. We revealed all of the incentives at the outset of the research project because we felt everyone involved - young people and adults - needed to be fully informed about participation. Considerable effort was put into providing written and verbal information that was clear, age appropriate, honestly outlined potential risks and benefits of the research and made it clear that participation was voluntary.

We decided not to offer food as a thank you gift because of concerns about exposing young people to the risks of unhealthy or allergy-likely food. Instead, we decided to formally recognise the time young members spent participating by presenting each young person with an individually named certificate of appreciation. We also verbally thanked young people at the time of site visits and wrote visual messages of 'thank you' at the beginning and end of the questionnaire and in the information and consent packages. We gave young people a choice of stickers or temporary tattoos which we hoped included enough design and colour diversity to appeal to both genders and to different age groups.

A key part of our strategy included a financial incentive. Each young person was offered the opportunity to go into a prize draw. We provided a large number of small value prizes (\$20 gift vouchers) rather than a small number of high value prizes. We felt this was a more equitable form of incentive because it was more widely shared. Though each single prize was small in value, the total value in the budget was not insubstantial and young people had a one-in-four chance of winning. The \$20 gift vouchers included iTunes gift cards, movie passes and department store gift cards. Participating youth organizations requested that, based on their duty of care to do no harm, we only offer gift vouchers that were retail store specific and not retail chain specific to reduce the chance they could be used to purchase alcohol.

Motivational props were introduced throughout the questionnaire ranging from "Thank you! That's the first section done!" to "Well done! Keep going!" This was a positive and easy strategy to adopt, and judging by participants' comments, the use of motivational statements worked well. These statements also motivated us when processing the questionnaire data. While our participation strategy was resource intensive, anecdotal evidence and participation data (opt-in rate of 60%, questionnaire completion rate 97%) suggests a high level of efficacy.

Reflexive questions/considerations:

Reflecting on our participation strategy vividly illustrated how complex the many layers of considerations are that we must consider when using incentives. There were two main areas where we felt we could have done better. First, we did not spend enough time considering the needs of the adults who we relied on to help facilitate youth participation (e.g., return of consent forms). Too many young people wanted to take part but couldn't because they did not have their signed parental or guardian consent form.

Our research would have been more effective if we had developed a strategy to support the return of consent forms. Second, while we felt the participation strategy we adopted would not lead to young people feeling coerced or pressured to take part we do not know this for sure. This raises two main questions:

1. How do we design components of our research to more actively seek out and document young people's opinion about why they choose to take part or not and what the decision-making process feels like for them?
2. Given the role adults play as gate-keepers and supporters, how do we gain a better understanding about what their needs are and what the research process feels like for them and why they do, or do not, choose to support young people's participation in our research?

Reference

Seymour, K. (2012). 'Using incentives: encouraging and recognising participation in youth research', *Youth Studies Australia*, 31 (3), 51-59.

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