Using incentives

Encouraging and recognising participation in youth research

This article explores the ethical implications of using incentives to encourage and recognise youth participation in research. While the complexity of research projects and the diversity of research subjects necessarily preclude simple solutions, the author argues that social research can successfully and ethically use a mix of extrinsic and intrinsic incentives. Reflecting on her own Queensland research, the author discusses four different incentives (altruism, payment, recognition and visual props) and contends that youth researchers can minimise the coercive effect of incentives by moderating and contextualising their use and by emphasising voluntary consent at all levels. She also suggests there is a need for researchers to add to the evidence base on the efficacy and ethical use of incentives in their research with young people.

by Kathryn Seymour

Historically, discussion about research processes and ethics has tended to focus on adult subjects. This is also true of the literature exploring the use of incentives. Only recently have we seen a rapid expansion in child and youth research and an emerging debate about the practice and ethics of using incentives in research with children and young people (see Bell 2008; Henderson et al. 2010; Rice & Broome 2004; Cocks 2006; Kirk 2007). The importance of encouraging young people's participation in research and recognising their contribution is not disputed; however, international scholarship does remain divided on the most effective and ethical methods of doing so (see Bessant 2006; Gibson 2007; Graham & Fitzgerald 2010; Heath et al. 2009; Morrow 2008). These divisions relate to complex and interlinked ethical issues on matters such as informed and voluntary consent (Wiles et al. 2007), privacy (Heath & Walker 2011), use of power (Carter 2009; Rice & Broome 2004), treating children and young people as same or different to adults (Kirk 2007) and the gatekeeper role that adults and institutions often play (Morrow & Richards 1996; Campbell 2008).

The debate on incentives has focused overwhelmingly on the efficacy and ethics of payments, and much of this discussion has been on medical and clinical research. The explicit use of a variety of incentives in other fields of research has not received as much attention (Cooper-Robbins et al. 2011; Head 2009; Powell 2011) and when incentives are discussed the

incentive effect is not always recognised. The kinds of things discussed in youth literature that can have an incentive effect include refreshments (Leakey et al. 2004; Truman 2003), tokens or gifts (Gibson 2007), relationships (Ely & Coleman 2007), compensation (Kahan & Al-Tamimi 2009), inducements (Rice & Broome 2004), reimbursements (Gibson 2007), altruism and public recognition (Cooper-Robbins et al. 2011), connections (Sanders & Munford 2005) and participation awards (Hill, Gallagher & Whiting 2009).

One of the key statements on the appropriate conduct of research in Australia, the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), Australian Research Council (ARC) & Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (AVCC) 2007), provides youth researchers with broad guidance on the use of incentives. Researchers are advised that they must take care to ensure incentives are not disproportionate to the time involved, do not result in any person feeling pressured to consent to take part or encourage them to take risks. Institutional ethical frameworks generally provide more guidance on the ethical use of incentives, but due to project- and context-specific complexities researchers must take time to supplement any guidance offered with additional ethical reflection and discussion.

An emerging practice some researchers are adopting is not to tell young people until they have finished participating that they will be receiving a gift, payment or reward. This approach is thought to address concerns of coercion or undue influence (Powell 2011). However, this approach is only useful if the purpose is for the gift, payment or reward to say "thank you" because, as Head (2009, p.341) notes, this approach cannot be used to encourage participation. As a strategy it is also not without controversy. Ely and Coleman (2007), argue that benefits must be revealed at the outset of research, while Wiles and colleagues (2007) believe that once a gift, payment or reward has been offered word can pass around and nullify the "surprise" effect, and Sime (2008, p.69) admits that non-disclosure at the outset may

create obligation to participate in further project stages.

In this article I explore the emerging debate on incentives by reflecting on the ethical dilemmas surrounding their use in my work with the Queensland Youth Development Research Project (YDRP)[1] and by drawing on a range of work across a diversity of disciplinary fields. Four different incentive mechanisms (altruism, payment, recognition and visual props) are discussed. I define incentives as those things that have a motivating effect on participation. Incentives generally help mediate or overcome the many different disincentives or contextual reasons influencing the decisions of young people and the adults around them about whether or not to participate in research. These factors can range from research-specific factors (such as liking or disliking the methodology being used) to person-specific factors (such as having or not having time to participate) (Guyll, Spoth & Redmond 2003, p.37). Incentives may operate "extrinsically", "intrinsically", or in a mixture of both of these modes. As will be discussed in more detail below, extrinsic (or external) incentives operate when rewards such as payments are offered to subjects for participating. Intrinsic (or internal) incentives, by contrast, operate when the research participation is motivated by the subject's own values or commitment to the research topic.

While the use of extrinsic and intrinsic incentives can be unethical, I argue here that social research can successfully *and* ethically use a mix of incentives. I use the ethical employment of incentives to mean minimising the possibility that their use will coerce participation by consulting on, moderating and contextualising their use, and by emphasising voluntary consent at all levels. The complexity of research projects, ethical considerations and the diversity of research subjects necessarily preclude simple solutions to the problem of successfully *and* ethically recruiting research participants. I therefore conclude by suggesting there is a need for researchers to add to the evidence base on the efficacy and ethical use of incentives in their research with young people.

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Background to the research project and aims

Our aim through the YDRP is to explore how mainstream youth programs can contribute to positive developmental outcomes for young people. We are interested in gaining a better understanding about the programmatic features that might contribute to positive developmental outcomes and exploring what difference these programs might make to the young people who take part in them.

Method

The research to which this paper refers is an important part of the YDRP and took place across 50 different sites in south-east Queensland during 2008–09. Young people were asked questions exploring a range of issues including their experience in the program, their life skills and their own, family and peer group participation in healthy, positive and risky problem activities. The questionnaires were administered by members of the research team at program group meetings, state or district camps. My research team sought informed and voluntary consent from young people, parents/guardians, program leaders and, where the program group was located in a school, from the school principal. We asked leaders to help publicise the research project, distribute and collect consent forms and arrange researcher access to program groups and facilities.

Since we were using a consent process that required adults to be approached first, we adopted strategies to help young people exercise their right to choose to participate or not. We hoped that by taking extra care we could enable young people to exercise their right to make an informed decision about whether to participate or not (see Bessant 2006; Coyne 2010; Valentine 1999). We therefore emphasised the voluntary nature of participation in all consent and information material. We also made sure that young members knew they could withdraw freely at any stage from the research and we emphasised this right to program leaders. We discussed optional activities for any young person not participating and asked leaders if they were aware of any literacy or cultural barriers that may affect the capacity of the young person to understand the research information and, where issues were identified, we provided one-on-one support.

Demographics

At the conclusion of the program site visits, we had gained consent from 440 young people ranging in age from 12 to 18 years. While the majority of these young people were female (56.8%), we did engage with a high proportion (43.2%) of young males too. Importantly, these young people came from a diversity of socio-cultural backgrounds. The majority of participants were born in Australia (87.0%); 4.0% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent; almost one quarter reported that their father (24.3%) and mother (21.6%) were born overseas; and 10.0% stated they spoke a language other than English at home. We also engaged with a diversity of communities across south-east Queensland, ranging from rural, semi-rural, urban, inner and outer city, and we worked across advantaged, middle-advantaged and disadvantaged communities.

Designing an incentive strategy

The efficacy and ethical use of incentives was a key consideration in the early stages of designing the YDRP with my research team and the participating youth organisations. A variety of issues about the use of incentives, many of which centred on the health, safety and wellbeing of young members (for example in not offering unhealthy or allergy-likely food, in formally recognising the time young members spent participating, and being conscious of the relevance of incentives to particular age groups) were raised. We also discussed how motivation to complete the questionnaire could be enhanced with improved design and changes to some of the questionnaire wording and structure. This consultation process clearly revealed a keen awareness among all involved that it is important to use a mix of incentives to encourage *and* recognise youth participation in research. It vividly illustrated that there are many layers of complex considerations, some of which this article outlines, that researchers need to reflect on when considering incentives.

> Motivation to complete the questionnaire could be enhanced with improved design.

This experience also led to a realisation that there is a real need for youth researchers to more actively seek out and document young people's opinion about why they choose to take part in research and what it feels like for them. Given the role adults often play as gatekeepers, a better understanding from their perspective may also help to improve future youth research. Such new insights will not only help researchers gain a better understanding about the efficacy of incentives and the ethics of using them from a range of viewpoints, but will also improve youth research outcomes (Bower et al. 2009; Head 2009; Kassam-Adams & Newman 2002; Storms & Loosveldt 2004).

Examples of incentives

Altruism

Altruism is a powerful intrinsic motivation for participation in research. Some people participate for altruistic reasons because they believe the research will contribute to a research topic that is important to them, that it will help others or because they believe it is everyone's social duty to participate (Singer & Bossarte 2006; Williams et al. 2008). In these cases, participation flows from a moral, emotional or intellectual commitment intrinsic to the research subject. Altruism can be spontaneously exhibited, but it can also be successfully encouraged by taking the time to carefully explain the research project to young people (Cooper-Robbins et al. 2011, p.12). Williams and colleagues (2008, p.1453; see also Powers 2007) counsel that because of this powerful effect, researchers must take care that their messages do not "cross the contentious boundaries between truth and exaggeration or between acceptable persuasion and undue coercion".

Throughout the YDRP, anecdotal evidence strongly indicated that altruism was an important factor influencing the decision of program leaders, parents and young people to participate. This evidence came to the fore in the compilation of a planning and reflective journal for each program site we visited. While we did receive some negative comments about the research, the overwhelming feedback from both young and older people was that their participation flowed from a sense of the value of the research. These altruistic motivations were also emphasised in the pilot process and the follow-up interviews with young people conducted by my research team and me. As one young male participant was recorded as saying, "the questions are important ones".

What is apparent in this evidence is that the nature of the research project is clearly an important factor in eliciting altruistic motives to participate. As Edwards and Alldred (1999, cited in Coyne 2010, p.230) put it, "[c]hildren's understanding of research and decision to participate are strongly linked to the meaning of the topic of the particular research project in the context of their lives generally". Cooper-Robbins and colleagues (2011, p.11) recently found this also to be the case with young people reporting both a strong commitment to participating in research because they would make a "social contribution", and also because they could find out more about themselves. As a result, they concluded altruism is "a strong foundation for building the attractiveness of research for young people".

This underscores the value of time spent in carefully explaining the project, answering questions and engaging the desire of young people to participate in social research. Considerable effort was put into my own research design to choose a highly motivated group of young people to join my research team and equip them with appropriate knowledge and skills to accomplish this task. Effort was also put into ensuring all written information was clear, age-appropriate and that it honestly outlined both potential risks and benefits of the research. In reflecting on this experience and the anecdotal evidence for altruistic participation, I conclude that, while this approach was resource-intensive, the positive outcomes made it worthwhile.

Payment

Clearly the most problematic, but also most common, form of research incentive is an extrinsic monetary reward either as a direct payment or as an in-kind payment of gifts, vouchers or tokens to individuals, families

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or youth groups (Powell 2011; Scherer et al. 2005; Fargas-Malet et al. 2010). Heath and colleagues (2009, p.36) write "[m]any researchers regard this as an appropriate way of expressing their gratitude to participants". However, as Gallagher (2009, p.23) reports, for some researchers the idea of offering a direct payment to young people is problematic because it "reinforces objectionable ideals of consumerist capitalism". Scott (2000, p.114) also acknowledges problems with payments, but argues monetary incentives should be offered to both adults and children because both should be valued equally. Others, such as Guyll, Spoth and Redmond (2003, p.38; also Storms & Loosveldt 2004), suggest that payments are important because they can reduce the exclusion of low-income families from research. On this issue, Field and Behrman (2005, p.48) warn that "[t]he major concern about payments related to research participation is that they may distort decision making." In their opinion:

Certain types of payments are usually acceptable, for example, reimbursements for reasonable expenses [or compensation payments for lost time]. Other payments are never appropriate, for example, paying parents for permitting their child to be exposed to greater research risk.

There are also other important considerations. These include understanding that sociocultural context can affect the perception of payments and their ethical use (Head 2009; Kahan & Al-Tamimi 2009; Powell 2011), and that payments must never "cause [a child or young person] to ignore or undervalue the risks" (Spriggs 2010, p. 12). Clearly, reflection on these matters must be project-specific. However, the greater the risks associated with a project, the more carefully a research team must consider whether a planned incentive could lead a young person to choose to expose themselves to a risk they would otherwise have avoided.

After considering these issues, we decided to offer each young person the opportunity to go into a prize draw to win a $20 gift voucher. To maximise the opportunity of winning a prize and provide a more equitable (because it was more widely shared) form of incentive a large number of small-value prizes rather than a small number of high-value prizes were offered. These $20 gift vouchers included iTunes gift cards, movie passes and department store gift cards (Target, Kmart, Myer). When discussing these vouchers, participating youth organisations 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. 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.

Though it is not entirely clear whether the prize draw was an effective form of incentive, anecdotal evidence suggests that it did have a positive influence on participation. At the very least it generated some excitement and discussion among groups of participants. Most importantly however, I believe that using the chance to win a small value reward obviated concerns about coercion and did not undercut the intrinsic altruistic motivation to participate. On this issue Cooper-Robbins and colleagues (2011, p.11) recently reported that when they asked 13- to 15-year-olds their views on incentives they found that they did not view them as "the driving force behind [their] participation". Rather, they saw financial incentives as a "bonus" (also Henderson et al. 2010). Researchers choosing direct payments as an incentive method do need to take more care to ensure the payment is not coercive. However, these findings support the research team's and participating youth development organisations' assessment that the relatively moderate value of the gift vouchers used in our prize draw did not in themselves serve as a sufficient motivation to participate and did not lead to undue inducement. There are, however, many other kinds of extrinsic incentives that can be used by researchers and some of these were also employed in the YDRP.

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Recognition

Researchers often employ extrinsic incentives to recognise and affirm the effort and contribution young people make when they participate in research. Among these recognition incentives, one of the most simple and basic is to think about ways to say "thank you". Hill, Gallagher and Whiting (2009, p.129) neatly explore the implications of this simple statement:

> It is important to thank all the children genuinely for giving their time participating in your session. This is just as important even if you do not feel that the group has been as successful as you had hoped.

This need for recognition was also articulated by the young people participating in Cooper-Robbins and colleagues' (2011, p.11) recent study on incentives. Here, young people linked their motivation to participate with "a desire for acknowledgement, such as a certificate or public announcement".

Adequately thanking all participants is clearly an important though simple act, but it is crucial that researchers find the right context-specific medium and means to do so. In my own youth research project, a verbal "thank you" at the time of site visits was complemented by including a written "thank you" at the beginning and end of the questionnaire and in the information and consent packages sent to young people, parents/guardians and program leaders. We also adopted more tangible rewards to say "thank you" by giving all young people a certificate of appreciation and their choice of a variety of sticker or temporary tattoo packs. While the stickers and the temporary tattoos were extremely popular because we made sure there were enough choices to appeal to a range of different age groups, I believe the most important and long lasting of all these forms of saying "thank you" was the certificate of appreciation. This A4-sized certificate was brightly coloured, personally addressed to each young person, included official program and organisation logos and formally celebrated each young person's contribution.

Once again, the intention behind the employment of these incentives was to reinforce rather than replace or undercut the intrinsic altruistic motivation of young people to participate. Only a few young people (mostly young men) chose not to take a pack of stickers or temporary tattoos or their certificate of appreciation. From my perspective, these "thank you" incentives served as a form of immediate recognition and also an expression of gratitude from the research team for the time spent completing the questionnaire. The value of this simple recognition cannot be underestimated. In all social situations, appropriate recognition of others is necessary to promote self-esteem, respect, harmony and cooperation (see Wood 2006; McLaughlin 2000) and is an essential component of good practice in youth development (Seymour 2011). The "thank yous" offered in the YDRP in their own small way modelled a positive mode of civil conduct by appropriately recognising the necessary contribution of the 440 young people whose responses form the backbone of my research.

Visual motivational props

Finally, the use of visual motivational props was adopted to encourage participants to complete the questionnaire. These are increasingly important in online surveys (Vincente & Reis 2010), but researchers have also experimented with paper-based questionnaires. Head (2009, p.336), for example, refers to the use of coloured ink. The use of visual motivational props in the YDRP questionnaire was influenced by feedback from young people who advocated for clip art cartoons and motivational statements. The motivational statements ranged from "Thank you! That's the first section done!", "Well done! Keep going!" to "Hi-Five!! You're halfway through!" This was a positive and easy strategy to adopt and judging by the various comments and "Hi-Fives" as participants worked their way through the questionnaire the use of motivational statements worked well. Surprisingly, these statements were also found to work when each member of the research team was entering questionnaire data into the SPSS software.

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While this is not absolute proof of the effectiveness of this strategy, the average completion rate of 97% for every question does add support to anecdotal evidence. Of course, other issues such as social context (Strange et al. 2003), trust in the research and belief in the equity of incentives can also affect willingness to answer questions (Boeije 2010, p.54). Arguably the motivational props helped achieve this high completion rate as participants, depending on their age, took on average between 30 and 50 minutes to complete the questionnaire, raising temptations to skip through or miss the final sections in the questionnaire.

Conclusion

The central argument of this paper is that productive social research involving young people has to be alive to the possibility that a suite of incentives to encourage *and* recognise their participation in research can be ethically incorporated into research design. Through the experience gained from the design and implementation of the youth research project, I conclude that a range of such incentives can provide an effective and appropriate set of tools for successful research involving young people. Though it is hard to be certain exactly how effective the YDRP incentive strategy was, the opt-in participation rate of 60% and the high questionnaire completion rate of over 97% suggests efficacy.[2] Nevertheless, our experience and the available literature on the efficacy of incentives *and* the ethics of using them in youth research suggests there is a real need for youth researchers to do more to document and report on their incentive use.

In our commitment to finding out what matters to young people, we must also make an effort to encourage and acknowledge them for their efforts in our research projects. Necessarily, young people's motivations are as complex as any adult subject and just like adults, young people respond to and appreciate a range of incentives. Above all, in designing an incentive strategy youth researchers need to understand the context in which their strategy will be used and be attuned to the ethical considerations around its employment. To this end, it is important to take a balanced view that does not reject all extrinsic incentives as unsuitable in research with young people. Ethically used and sensitively developed, extrinsic incentives can complement powerful altruistic intrinsic motivations to improve the research experience for young people and researchers.

Notes

1. The YDRP is managed by Griffith University and Impact: Youth Organisations Reducing Crime Limited. It is supported by the Queensland Youth Alliance and the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance. It is funded by the Australian Research Council, the Queensland Government Department of Communities and seven Queensland youth development programs and organisations: Girl Guides, The Boys' Brigade, The Duke of Edinburgh's Award, Lions Clubs International, Police Citizens Youth Clubs, Emergency Services Cadet Program and Surf Life Saving.

2. There was no researcher control over the distribution of information/consent packs. Potential participant numbers may therefore be overinflated.

Acknowledgements

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