CHAPTER 2

Section overview

Research methods to explore young people's voice, agency and civic engagement

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FRAMING RESEARCH ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S EMPOWERMENT

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to recognize the agency of young people and to advocate for their voices to be represented within global policy processes. Indeed, multinational research and programmatic institutions have highlighted the importance of investing in adolescents, who make up a large portion of young people globally. The Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing drew attention to the benefits of investing in adolescents to improve global health trajectories (Patton et al., 2016). In 2014, the World Health Organization launched an agenda for the next decade of adolescent health as a follow-up to the organization's commitment to youth health in 2011 (Dick and Ferguson, 2015). Additionally, the WHO Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health has launched its *1.8 billion for change* campaign that empowers adolescents and youth to advocate for greater attention on issues affecting youth globally (PMNCH, 2023). All the while, Sustainable Development Goal 5 targets gender equality and girls' empowerment, while national governments have also put girls' empowerment on the agenda (*Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2015). Consequently, research is evolving to capture

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the experiences of adolescents and youth, more comprehensively through new quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Fleming, 2011; Jones et al., 2019; Woodgate et al., 2017). This, along with participatory research methods that centre young people through the entirety of the research process, is allowing for a shift in power dynamics towards more emphasis on youth and adolescent agency.

While measuring levels of empowerment seems like an important precursor to enabling young people to exercise it, one must first consider its complexity. Empowerment is often conflated with agency, which Sen (1999) defines as a person or group's ability to make purposeful choices and act on values (Alkire, 2005; Crocker and Robeyns, 2009). As such, agency is a critical component of empowerment whereby people feel they have the knowledge, skills and self-efficacy to exercise their voice. However, an opportunity structure comprising the material and sociopolitical resources within institutional and social environments must also be in place to apply that agency (Kabeer, 1999). Women's empowerment movements introduce another domain of collective action, in which a group challenges institutions to grant rights previously denied to them. Indeed, even though women make up half of the global population, the consistent denial of rights and equality by patriarchal institutions can only be challenged through a community of change agents. Thus, our understanding of empowerment for this section centres around agency and opportunity structure, through which people are empowered to influence their own lives and challenge the power dynamics impacting them both individually and collectively (Malhotra and Schuler, 2002; Narayan-Parker, 2005; Rowlands, 1997).

While these theoretical definitions provide an important basis for our understanding of empowerment, work is ongoing to adapt these concepts to youth. Foci on youth empowerment began with women's empowerment, which was extended to include girls due to the global movement towards gender equality and keeping girls in school (Eerdewijk et al., 2017). This has broadened the conversation about what empowerment means for young people and what agency and opportunity structure look like in this population (Devonald et al., 2021). Though the aforementioned empowerment theories emphasize the importance of challenging power structures, there is little consideration for how this applies to young people who often lack access to the necessary material and social resources to achieve it (Mason and Hood, 2011; Sawyer et al., 2018). As young people make up a large and growing portion of the global population, expanding efforts to support their agency and empowerment is critical (PMNCH, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). With these concerns in mind, this chapter focuses on answering three key questions:

1 How can measures of empowerment be tailored to adolescents and young people?
2 How can (and should) researchers use innovative research methods for exploring diverse adolescent and young people's voice, agency and citizenship?
3 How can adolescents and young people be engaged as drivers and leaders throughout the research process?

In attending to these issues, this introduction draws attention to the overlapping conceptual, methodological, ethical and practical considerations encountered in research on adolescent and young people's voice, agency and citizenship. This provides a framework and reference point for reading the subsequent chapters, which explore the application of different methodological tools and approaches from a variety of perspectives and across diverse contexts.

QUANTITATIVE MEASURES OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

Multiple studies have implemented quantitative instruments to measure empowerment among young people. Beckert's (2007) Cognitive Autonomy and Self Evaluation inventory quantifies five areas of independent thought, including the capacity to evaluate thought, voice opinion, make decisions, capitalize on validations and self-assess. This tool is helpful in measuring agency and self-efficacy, though it was developed with a sample of only high school students and thus cannot be generalized to young people as a whole (Rowlands, 1997). The measure developed by Bandura and colleagues (1999) addresses self-efficacy among young adolescents, including their ability to deal with social challenges, academic self-efficacy and ability to resist peer pressure (Muris, 2001). Self-efficacy, defined by Bandura as an individual's belief in their capacity to act in the ways necessary to reach specific goals, is considered an important component of agency, though is not sufficient on its own to achieve desired outcomes (Bandura et al., 1999; Brinthaupt and Lipka, 1994; Jennings et al., 2006). Additional studies have developed measures of agency and empowerment among young people specifically around relationships and sexual and reproductive health, thus using the women's empowerment constructs outlined by Kabeer (1999) and Malhotra and Schuler (2002).

Neumeister and colleagues (Chapter 3) provide an outline of contemporary longitudinal studies that have developed validated tools measuring empowerment among young people, as well as how empowerment is (or is

not) included in nationally representative surveys. They highlight how surveys such as DHS, MICS and VACS capture some aspects of agency for older adolescents and young people but do so through measures of violence and sexual health. While these themes address common arenas in which empowerment is constrained, especially for women and girls, they fail to capture the broader picture of how that constriction was formed and what opportunities to expand empowerment exist. In response, Neumeister and colleagues identify four contemporary longitudinal studies that specifically target young people and include measures of empowerment. First is the Birth to Twenty (B20) cohort study which addresses individual agency through measures of self-esteem, social and psychological adjustment and perception of ability to participate in their communities (Richter et al., 2007). The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence and Young Lives studies measure opportunity structures, targeting access to different resources, civic engagement, aspirations and level of decision-making power in families and communities (Boyden and Walnicki, 2021; Jones et al., 2018). The Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS) also includes decision-making but adds the domains of freedom of voice and movement for very young adolescents, the most underrepresented age group in empowerment research (Zimmerman et al., 2019). Hunersen and Li (Chapter 4) examine results from these empowerment measures in the GEAS across five diverse cultural contexts, which show freedom of voice and decision-making was highest among young adolescents who had close relationships with teachers and caregivers. This highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in creating spaces to exercise agency. However, qualitative data showed these experiences changed dramatically when schools were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic and interpersonal relationships were shifted and strained. As such, measuring agency and opportunity structure quantitatively only tells one side of the story. To gain a deeper understanding of what other factors and thematic areas influence these quantitative domains, innovative qualitative methods step in.

AMPLIFYING DIVERSE YOUTH VOICES

While quantitative tools are critical for understanding mechanisms of empowerment, researchers must also empower young people themselves to honestly and openly share their experiences (James, 2007; Skelton, 2008). However, to do so requires careful consideration of how to ethically and meaningfully include young people from diverse backgrounds and abilities (Bonevski et al., 2014; Marsh et al., 2019; Pincock and Jones, 2020). One of the pitfalls of research with young people is the assumption that they are similar to adults and thus should follow the same methodologies, which

often perpetuates imbalanced power dynamics and inhibits positive engagement (Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Punch, 2002). Even if adults recognize that children have different but equally valuable competencies, innovative research methods and deep reflexive understanding of adults' own perceptions are necessary to encourage meaningful participation by young people (James et al., 1998). Such methods should also be context- and population-specific, as methods that are designed with one setting and level of access in mind might not be appropriate for marginalized groups (V. Marsh et al., 2019). This comes out in the example of research with street children, who are not as easily captured through traditional forms of school- or household-based sampling, or with data collection methods that require a high level of literacy (van Blerk et al., 2016). This is not to suggest that new methods need to be created for every subpopulation of youth. Rather, the aim should be to develop methods that could be used for anyone but are also adaptable to the needs and abilities of marginalized groups and young people (Punch, 2002). This work has already begun, as researchers are developing innovative qualitative methodologies that support young people to exercise their voices and share their stories.

Methods that involve abstract forms of expression, sometimes referred to as 'participatory arts', support maximum opportunities for young people to creatively share their views (Ozer et al., 2020; Ozer and Piatt, 2017; Pincock and Jones, 2020). Pincock and Jones (2020) adopted a methodology called 'community mapping', which involves group discussion of what spaces in their communities are safe and which present barriers to certain health services. A similar methodology was used in the Kolkata Street Champions' work highlighted in this section, where they conducted a 'Vulnerability Assessment and Service Mapping' that allowed street-connected children to share their experiences and better understand the issues that must be addressed. Body mapping, which similarly involves group reflection, also allows drawing and individual representation of how physical and gendered changes influence their experiences in their communities (Pincock and Jones, 2020; Solomon, 2002). Photovoice is another validated tool, which involves participants photographing aspects of their lives or communities that illustrate their perspective, then discussing those photographs in a group setting (Wang and Burris, 1997). This method not only promotes self-reflection by young people but also helps generate more community interest when using visual data to disseminate results (Findholt et al., 2011; Woodgate et al., 2017). Indeed, artistic expression through drawing and photography is a common tool in qualitative research with young people, creating opportunities for more creative representations of thoughts or emotions that would be difficult to achieve in a traditional adult-led focus group setting (Clark, 2010;

Dennis et al., 2009; Findholt et al., 2011; Ho et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2019; Literat, 2013; Woodgate et al., 2017).

Each of these methods relies on group discussion, whereby young people feel comfortable and safe to reflect and voice opinions while also building trust and community with each other. In her contribution to this section of the book, 'Sara' (Chapter 9) describes her experiences using some of the above methods (service mapping, photography and vignettes), but she felt the most impact from being able to exercise her voice without fear of retribution in a focus group setting. Through building relationships with the other participants in an environment free of judgement, she gained insights about how she wanted to raise her own children to allow them the voice and agency she was denied. Osorio (Chapter 5) similarly combined multiple tools in a Mosaic Approach, which centres children and adolescents as the 'protagonists' of their opinions, perceptions and observations (Clark, 2001, 2010). These examples raise an important point, that while the above qualitative methodologies can be helpful tools, they are only effective if adult researchers can relinquish their adult-centric perspective and understand that young people are competent human beings who deserve to be heard (Alfageme Anavitarte et al., 2003). In Chile, where Osorio's work was done, young people are increasingly participating in national political movements, creating spaces through protest and civic engagement to exercise a voice that was previously denied to them. While this approach successfully put child rights on the political agenda, work is ongoing to understand how children and adolescents want and need to participate. Osorio (Chapter 5) notes that the most effective way to achieve meaningful participation is to put young people at the fore, letting them determine how they participate. This is the foundation of participatory research.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RESEARCH

In addition to research *about* young people, a growing body of work involves research *with* and *for* young people (Beazley and Ennew, 2006). The important difference is that the mechanism by which research is designed, implemented, analysed and disseminated includes young people in some or all phases. Through this participatory process, researchers recognize that those who are being studied will have critical social knowledge and thus should be empowered to act as not just subjects but also leaders (Catalano et al., 2019; Fleming, 2011; MacDonald, 2012; Skelton, 2008). This concept, deemed 'Participatory Research' based on the work of Freire (1972), is a promising methodology for conducting research co-produced by youth (MacDonald, 2012; Wallerstein and Bernstein, 1988). However, its success

is strongly dependent on the thoughtfulness and skill level of adults, who must first carry a deep understanding of the population they are seeking to benefit through this work. As such, young people should only be engaged to the extent they are willing, able and interested (Pain and Francis, 2003). Indeed, youth and adolescent involvement without their express interest or understanding of intent can even be harmful if it becomes tokenistic or even manipulative, as portrayed on Hart's (2013) ladder of participation (see also Cuevas-Parra, this volume Chapter 30). Though institutional requirements for age or degree levels to receive funding or political power make it difficult to truly reach youth/adult equity at the top of the ladder, researchers trained in participatory methods can promote work that is initiated and directed by young people. This ensures that the issues being addressed are of importance to youth and adolescents and also that the research methods being used will be appropriate to that population (Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2019).

Despite these benefits, adult researchers often get caught up in the ethical and safeguarding challenges, citing them as a barrier to knowledge exchange with youth. As such, many prefer to exclude youth completely rather than take a deeper ethnographic perspective to understand the needs and challenges of their target population (Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2019; Punch, 2002). To illustrate this, we can again turn to the example of street children, who have often been deemed out of reach for researchers due to ethical (lack of guardians to provide consent) and logistical (highly mobile population) challenges (van Blerk et al., 2016). However, work by van Blerk and colleagues (2016) shows that street children can produce richer and deeper output than any work done by adults alone. This formed the basis of work with the Kolkata Street Champions (Chapter 6), who were able to reach a broad network of other street youth and conduct their own vulnerability assessment to ensure the research aims focused on issues they identified with. It is important to note that such participatory research requires strong emotional and social skills of adult facilitators as well as extensive capacity building for youth in research and critical thinking (Berg et al., 2009; Catalano et al., 2019; Growing Up on the Streets, 2016). However, this groundwork provides a platform on which young people feel confident to share their voices, exercise agency and advocate for solutions on behalf of themselves and their peers.

Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) includes this additional step of engaging youth within and beyond the research to also create desired change (Jacquez et al., 2013; Ozer and Piatt, 2017). Ozer and Piatt (2017) have written extensively on this methodology and highlight three areas where adolescents take leadership: (1) identification of the issues they want to improve, (2) conducting research to understand the issues and possible solutions and (3) advocating for changes based on research evidence

(Ozer et al., 2020; Ozer and Wright, 2012). This advocacy component is a critical step, as results from participatory research are only as impactful as there is an audience for such work in the sociopolitical space. In their contribution to this book, Mesalie Gbenday and Salamatu Tajawai (Chapter 8) echo this sentiment, sharing they experienced pushback from community members who believed research should be done by adults. However, through support from adult facilitators, they were able to shift these normative beliefs and act as role models to both parents and peers. While this again demonstrates the difficulty with achieving that highest point on Hart's (2013) ladder of participation, it does show that adult and young researchers can have positive relations that promote the voices of young people (Catalano et al., 2019; van Blerk et al., 2016). At its core, YPAR gives young people ownership over the research process and how the data is used. As Carlos Henrique Lemos (Chapter 7) puts it in his piece, participatory research opened their eyes to the issues facing their peers and communities, which became their 'fighting fuel', or their energy to make a change. It has the potential to empower young people through exercising agency in determining research needs, working hand in hand with adults to open opportunity structures for their voices to be heard and building collective action to create social change.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE AND METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Before applying any of these methodological advancements, researchers must consider the significant cognitive, social and physical changes that characterize this broad age group (Blum et al., 2012; Chandra-Mouli et al., 2017; Patton et al., 2016; Sawyer et al., 2012). In early adolescence (ages 10–14), young people begin physical maturation through puberty, as well as social maturation as they transition from occupying social space primarily in their families and households and to spaces among peers and in communities (Blum et al., 2014). Empowerment at this phase has historically been challenging to define and measure, as young adolescents are starting to decide who they want to be while still being largely controlled by the rules and expectations of parents and caregivers (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2017; Kågesten et al., 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2019). When young people reach older adolescence (ages 15–19) and early adulthood (ages 20–24), agency is increasingly shaped by gender, with girls being physically or socially constrained to protect them from sexual promiscuity or predation as boys are told to enter the workforce and care for their families (Crawford and Popp, 2003; Heise et al., 2019; Malhotra et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2018). All the while, young people have

been unable to challenge the sociopolitical institutions in which they have consistently not been allowed a seat at the table (Mason and Hood, 2011; Sawyer et al., 2018). Devonald et al. (2021) illustrate this phenomenon using the terms 'early adulthood', when adolescents are forced into adult responsibilities too early, and 'waithood', where adolescents are denied the economic or institutional resources to successfully move into adulthood.

Despite this understanding, national and global survey tools include the entirety of the 15–49 age group with little disaggregation in reporting of results (Diaz et al., 2021; USAID, 2023). Indeed, fewer than 10% of the SDG indicators require disaggregation of data by age, which specifically impacts the health needs of adolescents (Guglielmi et al., 2022). This has left wide variability in how young people are measured, with age groups varying significantly across survey tools. In an effort to promote standardization of age groups and more adolescent- and youth-specific data, the WHO has created the Global Action for Measurement of Adolescent Health (GAMA) which has put out a set of recommended priority indicators (Guthold et al., 2019; A.D. Marsh et al., 2022). Though some of these indicators address individual and institutional factors that might contribute to agency within a healthcare setting, they fail to specifically name agency as a priority indicator. Further elaboration is needed to identify how opportunity structures and agency create a positive or negative environment to achieve the health indicators highlighted by GAMA.

Lastly, the methodologies described in this section must be implemented with careful consideration of ethical factors. Ethically, adolescents under age 18 are often deemed by governments and research institutions as a 'vulnerable population' that cannot provide full informed consent because they are not considered competent enough to understand the risks (Kirk, 2007). While this should not preclude adolescent involvement in research, it does require that research teams have a clear and informed understanding of the population they are trying to reach and the local laws around working with minors. Additionally, traditional ethical practices such as compensation, confidentiality and privacy must be navigated according to the cultural context and the concerns of parents/caregivers (Kirk, 2007; Medicine et al., 2004; Schelbe et al., 2015). While there is a large body of research that details how to ethically conduct research with minors, including young people at the start of the process and using participatory methods increase the likelihood that the design and language will be appropriate for that age group (Fleming, 2011; Schelbe et al., 2015). This can also ameliorate potential variations in skills and comfort levels and allow researchers to meet the developmental capacities of young people (Schelbe et al., 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

Empowerment for young people exists in a developmental space where individual agency is forming and growing, but the opportunity structure in which to exercise this agency is often constrained due to institutionalized unequal power dynamics between adults and young people. Advancements in the measurement of youth empowerment are painting a clearer picture of how these forces combine to influence health outcomes like sexual reproductive health and violence, as well as social outcomes like community decision-making power and civic engagement. Innovative qualitative tools such as photography, drawing and mapping can provide richer information from young participants and empower them to speak their truth. Combining such tools in a mixed-methods approach can form a mosaic of data that illustrates the complexity of young people's experiences. This can especially amplify the voices of marginalized young people who are either not accessible through traditional adult-centric methodologies or lack the confidence or support to honestly share their thoughts and opinions. Youth participatory research takes a step further, building young people's agency and collective action by training them to lead throughout the research process. Though participatory methods require highly skilled adult facilitators who have a deep ethnographic understanding of the youth population they are working with and can create an environment of equality and youth leadership, the evidence shows that young researchers can and do produce deep and valuable information that would have been inaccessible to adult researchers alone. Building young people's agency through research and creating opportunity structures for the results of that research to be heard and valued promote youth empowerment to act as agents of change in their own lives and in their communities.

BOX 2.1 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Where are the main knowledge gaps in research on adolescent and young people's voice and agency, and what methodological approaches could help address these gaps?
- What are the differences between 'empowerment' and 'agency' from a measurement perspective?
- What are the advantages of a longitudinal and mixed-methods approach for studying young people's voice, agency, participation and civic engagement?
- What are not only the advantages but also potential challenges involved in participatory approaches to researching voice and agency with adolescents and young people?
- Given their heterogeneity as a group, what adaptations are necessary to ensure that adolescents and youth across the spectrum of age, gender, disability, citizenship, marital status and who live in diverse contexts can participate? What are the ethical considerations?

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