UTILIZING YOUTH ADVOCATES AND COMMUNITY AGENCIES IN RESEARCH WITH LGBTQ YOUNG PEOPLE: ETHICAL AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Vanessa R. Panfil, Jody Miller and Maren Greathouse

ABSTRACT

An existing tension in sociological and criminological research with young people is the need to seek parental consent for research participation, while acknowledging that providing parents with descriptions of the research may put youth in precarious positions. This is particularly true when discussing sensitive topics such as interpersonal violence, gang involvement, and/or LGBTQ identity. One mechanism to maximize research participant protections while still preserving their privacy is to utilize independent youth advocates during the consent and research processes, sometimes by sampling with the assistance of youth-serving community agencies. Although such arrangements can be mutually beneficial for research participants, scholars, and the agencies themselves, concerns...
Some of the most influential and illuminating works in criminology, sociology, and gender/sexuality studies are based on research with youth and young people. Qualitative research, especially, has given us unique insight into the experiences and social worlds of minors. Insights include how Black and Latino boys are hypercriminalized, oversurveilled, and ultimately punished with far-reaching consequences (Rios, 2011), how urban African-American young women experience pervasive gendered and sexualized violence in their schools and communities (Miller, 2008), and how schools act as sites where masculinity, compulsory heterosexuality, and homophobia can be reproduced but also challenged (Pascoe, 2007).

Despite the promise that social science research with minors can inform policy and praxis, the logistical elements of such work can prevent scholars from pursuing these opportunities. Concerns abound: How can we gain access to, and build rapport with, marginalized populations of young people? How can we ensure that youth understand the goals and practice of our research, and can use this knowledge to inform their decision to participate? How can we conduct research in a way that minimizes risks to study participants while generating beneficial knowledge? What are the practical obstacles to successfully completing these studies? These are but a few of the many questions that must be considered before embarking on a study with minors (see Best, 2007; Graue & Walsh, 1998). A standard practice is to secure parental consent when obtaining youth assent, based on the belief that parents will assess risks on behalf of their children, helping them make
informed decisions about whether or not to participate. However, because the research that social scientists conduct often taps into sensitive topics, including criminalized and/or sexual behavior, there may be valid reasons why some populations of youth could experience less risk if their parents did not know they were participating in research. In such situations, what strategies can researchers employ to protect participants using methods other than obtaining parental consent? Will university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) approve the proposed research without direct parental involvement? In lieu of parental consent, are there ways to provide meaningful guidance and support for study participants who are under 18 years of age?

This chapter explores several options that scholars may want to consider when conducting studies of minors without the full involvement of their parents. Specifically, we discuss the assistance of youth advocates and community agencies in recruitment and consent procedures. Relatedly, we provide strategies for navigating university IRBs that must approve research, by designing studies that can provide sufficient protection of youth through utilizing youth advocates, which are consistent with federal guidelines. Partnerships between researchers, youth advocates, and community agencies can be mutually beneficial for study participants, scholars, and the agencies themselves, by providing constructive and collaborative spaces to learn about and better serve youth. However, engaging in meaningful collaboration can be challenging when navigating logistical considerations, including strains on agency staff, ownership of data/results, conflicts of interest, and funding. While we draw from other social science studies with young people, our primary example is a study we recently completed with urban LGBTQ youth. We explore this case to discuss the ethical and practical considerations of calling on the assistance of youth advocates and community agencies in research with minors, specifically when parental consent poses risks of its own.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Researchers may utilize youth advocates in place of, or in conjunction with, parental permission. Typically, IRBs require that minors who participate in social science research obtain parental consent. This is representative of a larger issue, frequently highlighted by childhood researchers, whereby minors are restricted from full participation in social life. For
example, minors cannot legally consent to contracts pertaining to property exchanges, consign to the military, or purchase certain items, because by law they are defined as insufficiently mature or rational to weigh those decisions. Requiring minors to obtain parental permission in order to participate in social science research originates from a concern that minors will make disclosures that could be damaging to their futures. The rationale is similar to, for example, having parents present when minors are in police custody and are being interrogated in the attempt to prevent youth from revealing information that might endanger their freedoms (though, sometimes parents actually encourage kids to make disclosures to police; see Feld, 2013). Ultimately, parental permission and guidance are intended to protect children’s rights.

Despite these considerations, there are reasons for waiving parental consent requirements. One of the main circumstances in which parental permission might become an issue is when disclosure to parents of the goals of the study could negatively impact the parent/child relationship, especially in ways that might lead to parental rejection of, or emotional distance from, the child. These studies could involve questions about abuse or other victimization but, more generally, they include the revelation of socially stigmatized statuses, such as having committed delinquent acts, gang membership, LGBTQ identity, and so on. Some social science researchers craft protocols with the intent to frame policy or practice, so it would be egregious to conduct research that may benefit youth in the future but harm the youth who participate in the study.

Federal guidelines determine what qualifies as minimal risk and articulate the parental consent standards for minors under 18. As outlined in 45CFR§46.102i, a risk is minimal where “the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.” These standards apply to youth under age 18 (see 45CFR§46.404) as long as “adequate provisions are made for soliciting the assent of the children and the permission of their parents or guardians.” Alternatively, it is required that “an appropriate mechanism for protecting the children who will participate as subjects in the research is substituted” for parental consent (see 45CFR§46.408c), which is considered a reasonable requirement in the protection of youth study participants. In our experiences across four universities, IRBs have responded favorably to our applications because we have explicitly cited and relied upon these federal standards, and also carefully made the case that obtaining parental consent could pose a risk to adolescent research participants. Making this case involves providing empirical
evidence of potential risks associated with parental disclosure and describing methodological precedents found in similar previous studies, as we detail further below.

Conducting studies in supportive settings (like community agencies) and with knowledgeable adults (such as highly trained youth advocates) is one way to reduce the potential psychological discomforts associated with reporting negative experiences. For us, this has provided, as per 45CFR§46.408c, “an appropriate mechanism for protecting” adolescent study participants in lieu of disclosing study goals to parents. Social science studies of queer-spectrum young people—particularly criminological studies such as our own—ask youths about sensitive topics related to experiences with anti-LGBTQ harassment and abuse and other safety or mental health concerns. The possible distress from discussing harmful experiences within supportive settings has a very low probability of being greater than the distresses of experiencing these events in daily life.\(^4\) In addition, strong confidentiality safeguards mitigate potential risks for social and economic harms; for example, the potential ostracism by valued others or expulsion from the home were young people’s sexual identities inadvertently made public. Thus, based on the federal guidelines and extant research, utilizing youth advocates in lieu of parental consent and sampling from/collecting data at trusted community organizations are viable and constructive options for researchers. When requesting a waiver of parental consent, other options might include conducting a formal assessment of decisional capacity prior to participation, identifying ways in which the inclusion of a particular population (in our case LGBTQ youth) is consistent with the Belmont Report that guides IRB decisions, and/or (if applicable) arguing that minors in that particular state are legally able to make medical decisions without parental consent once they have reached a certain age (see Mustanski, 2011, for detail on these strategies).

In the event that youth advocates are utilized in conjunction with a waiver of parental consent, the youth advocate’s involvement provides protection similar to that of parental permission, while mitigating the potential risks of parental disclosure. In scenarios where parents give permission to participate but are not present at the assent stage, youth advocates are still helpful in translating the research process for minors and assisting youth to make informed decisions. Whether youth advocates take the place of or buttress parental permission, they must participate in the assent process to ensure that minors understand, and are participating freely in, the research. At a minimum, a youth advocate should be an independent adult who is not a researcher for the project and who will not have access to identifiable
data or a role in analyzing data. Ideally, they should also be someone who has experience working with young people, preferably the same or similar populations to be sampled for the research.

For example, a youth advocate for criminological projects with gang members or LGBTQ youth would ideally have some specialized training in youth violence prevention or clinical counseling/social work, respectively. The youth advocate’s role is to help youth realistically weigh the costs and benefits of the research, to answer any questions the youth has about the process, and to make sure researchers are not presenting undue pressure, even unwittingly, on potential participants. There is a long history of youth advocates, particularly individuals who hold positions at community centers, assisting with research in this way (see Embleton et al., 2015; Miller, 2001, 2008; Wolbransky, Goldstein, Giallella, & Heilbrun, 2013). This is especially true for work with marginalized populations, such as studies that focus on youth violence and LGBTQ populations.

**UTILIZING YOUTH ADVOCATES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS: THE EXAMPLE OF RESEARCHING LGBTQ YOUTH**

Extant studies of LGBTQ youth drawn from community agencies and centers have focused on LGBTQ youths’ lives in many ways that contribute to meaningful scholarship. Topics of interest to criminologists include victimization within community settings (e.g., neighborhoods and homes) (Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995) and incidents of and coping with school violence (Grossman et al., 2009). Sociologically based topics include experiencing and negotiating gender norms (Blackburn, 2007); the consequences of sexual identity disclosures (D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998); how youth nonverbally manage visibility of their queer identity (Lasser & Wicker, 2008); and rural queer youths’ negotiation of visibility and uses of media (Gray, 2009). Psychological or public health topics include depression, suicidality, and related factors (Safren & Heimberg, 1999); mental health problems, substance use, and sexual risk taking (Mustanski, 2011); gender atypicality, victimization, and PTSD (D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006); and positive perceptions of individuals’ own sexual identities (Harper, Brodsky, & Bruce, 2012).

Multiple challenges confront those who research queer-spectrum young people. The size of this population is unknown; furthermore, the
characteristics that define this population are highly subjective. Does one focus on attraction, behavior, identity, or some combination of all three? How the term “sexual minority” is operationalized has real impacts on findings, implications, and who is eligible to participate in the research (Savin-Williams, 2001). Community partners who work with LGBTQ youth can assist with such definitional and sampling decisions. Regardless of eligibility requirements, community outreach organizations can help recruit participants who are experiencing the particular phenomena under investigation, which may be difficult to recruit for in general youth samples. Recruitment with the help of community outreach organizations also can help make convenience/non-probability samples larger and more diverse.

Existing research suggests that some LGBTQ youth face the risk of displacement from their homes or financial marginalization or neglect by parents due to their sexual and/or gender identity disclosures (see Human Rights Campaign, 2014). Indeed, young people who live at home and come out to their parents face more victimization within their families than youth who do not come out (D’Augelli et al., 1998). Since these are not risks that researchers are or should be willing to take, conducting research with these populations can require creative solutions to such problems.

Our study sought to better understand the daily lives of a racially and ethnically diverse group of LGBTQ high school students in Newark, New Jersey, including their experiences with anti-LGBTQ bias and mistreatment in their schools and neighborhoods, their perceptions of the availability of services and social supports, and their exposure to risky behaviors. We came to the project noting that several decades of research finds that schools are often unsafe and unsupportive places for youths who identify as LGBTQ. These youths’ negative school experiences contribute to increased absenteeism, lower levels of academic achievement, and higher risk for behaviors such as risky sexual activities, substance use and misuse, and self-harm (Button, O’Connell, & Gealt, 2012; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2007; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). However, we recognized that limited research has specifically assessed the experiences of LGBTQ youth in urban communities that are characterized by high rates of poverty, racial segregation, and violence (though, see Panfil, 2014). This is despite evidence that general samples of youth in such communities face disproportionate risks for poor school outcomes, emotional distress, and exposure to violence and victimization (Brunson & Miller, 2009; Cobbina, Miller, & Brunson, 2008; Farrell & Bruce, 1997; Lauritsen, 2003; Sampson, 1997; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999).
Given evidence that gender-based victimization is heightened for adolescent girls in such community contexts (Miller, 2008), and that anti-LGBTQ bias is often coupled with gender bias (Duncan, 1999; Franklin, 2004; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003), we recognized there is strong reason to believe that LGBTQ youth in urban communities face unique challenges when navigating their schools and neighborhoods. By assessing the extent and contexts of these challenges, as well as the availability of social supports and youths’ navigational strategies, our goals were to contribute knowledge to the scholarly community. We also sought to produce concrete recommendations to better serve this population – to be put to use by our project partners, which included the Rutgers University-Newark LGBTQ and Diversity Resource Center, personnel at the local school district, and a local community agency whose primary goal is to promote healthy development for LGBTQ young people through a variety of services and programs.

Since parents may not be aware of their child’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or queer identity, and because disclosure of that identity may present additional risk to youth (since such identities remain stigmatized), one strategy scholars utilize is to seek IRB approval to waive parental consent. In this manner, data beneficial to LGBTQ young people is collected and disseminated without putting research participants at further risk of harm. We are aware of at least six studies that have done so, and utilized community organizations for recruitment help (D’Augelli et al., 2006; Gray, 2009; Grossman et al., 2009; Lasser & Wicker, 2008; Mustanski, 2011; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995). Four of the six aforementioned studies, each granted a waiver of parental consent from their respective IRBs, also utilized youth advocates to answer young people’s questions. This ensured that youth (1) understood what was to happen in the research, (2) comprehended informed consent procedures, (3) understood confidentiality, and (4) were not coerced or pressured into participating.

Utilizing a hybridized research procedure is another option, which is the approach we employed. Our study began with a survey offered during an LGBTQ youth leadership conference held at the university, which was a prospective student outreach event. The conference was organized by its LGBTQ and Diversity Resource Center (the third author served as its Director at the time) in partnership with personnel at the city’s school district and the local LGBTQ youth-serving agency. Program staff from this agency were among those who led workshops at the conference, along with university offices and other local community organizations. Youths were required to provide a parental permission slip to attend the event, so our team included a separate question on the permission form for participation
in the survey. We felt safe utilizing this strategy — rather than seeking a waiver of parental consent altogether — since the youth conference explicitly targeted both LGBTQ youth and their allies. Thus, conference participants were not necessarily LGBTQ, so the queer aspects of the study did not need to be highlighted via the literature distributed to parents. If the project does not imply that youth have something to disclose, parental permission can be retained as part of the process. And indeed, even when parental consent is waived, LGBTQ minors may consult their parents before deciding to participate in a research study (see Ybarra et al., 2016).

In our study, only minors whose parents gave them permission to complete the survey were eligible, but the actual assent procedures were completed with the assistance of a youth advocate from the participating community agency who was specifically trained in mental health considerations for LGBTQ young people. The lead author, with the youth advocate, gathered groups of interested students together and she explained the goals and procedures of the research. The lead author then stepped out of the room so the youth advocate could discuss the pros and cons of participating with the entire group (and individually, if requested). Once the youth advocate was satisfied that students gave informed assent, he witnessed youths sign the assent forms and added his signature. Students with signed assent forms entered a separate classroom, where the second author and a small team of research assistants distributed surveys to each youth. The survey was the first part of our study, conducted to provide concrete information to project partners about the populations they serve and the settings in which they serve. The surveys also functioned as a recruitment tool for the second portion of the project — qualitative interviews with a diverse group of LGBTQ youth navigating daily life in their urban communities.

The interview portion of the project did not involve additional parental consent, and it was this portion for which we obtained a parental waiver from our IRB. To identify study participants, we included a tear-off sheet at the end of the survey that youths could fill out if they were interested in participating in the follow-up interview. These in-depth interviews were held at the local LGBTQ youth-serving agency where the youth advocate was employed, so the youth advocate was again present at that location. In addition to the conference, we sampled directly from the agency’s population, utilizing the youth advocate for assent procedures for the survey and the interview. We readily secured university IRB approval for this hybrid approach by making the case for confidentiality and potential heightened risk as described above. Most importantly, our application directly cited and quoted from federal guidelines 45CFR§46.102i and 45CFR§46.408c,
providing IRB committee members the assurance that we had carefully considered our procedures and that they were in line with acceptable practices. We also provided extensive evidence of our rationale for minimizing the involvement and knowledge of parents, including the review and citation of the studies mentioned above pertaining to the potential harms that can result from youths’ disclosures of their LGBTQ identities to their families.

Our team used several strategies to reduce risk and improve benefits to study participants. We specifically chose a youth advocate who had extensive experience working with this population to best ensure protection of any youth who experienced discomfort during or immediately following their participation in the study. For example, if a participant disclosed the intent to harm themselves or someone else, this youth could receive immediate intervention on-site from an expert trained to handle crisis situations—something we as researchers were not trained or prepared to do. Additionally, we provided study participants with lists of resources for services in the community that were appropriate for the population included in the sample; in this case, services targeting LGBTQ people (including counseling, STI/HIV testing, shelters/housing, food assistance, and so on). In order to protect confidentiality, surveys can be anonymous (with only a number linked to them) or confidential (with a number assigned to each participant that only the research team knows), and pseudonyms can be created for interview or focus group participants. Other studies utilizing youth advocates or community agencies have similarly employed techniques such as referral sheets (Safren & Heimberg, 1999) or debriefing to assess the need for referrals (Harper et al., 2012), using pseudonyms for interview/focus group participants (Blackburn, 2007; Grossman et al., 2009; Harper et al., 2012; Lasser & Wicker, 2008), obtaining a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institute of Health (D’Augelli et al., 2006; Mustanski, 2011), and conducting interviews at the community center location where recruitment occurred (Blackburn, 2007; Lasser & Wicker, 2008).

Youth advocates may hold positions at community centers and organizations, as was the case in our research, but this is not a necessity. If they do hold positions in organizations that offer youth follow-up services, it may be useful to have advocates’ contact information on the consent form and other research materials. Recognizing that youths may not retain their assent forms for a variety of reasons, we also listed the youth advocate’s contact information on the survey (as a tear-off portion). One young person did actually tear off the information, while others took pictures of it on their cell phones. In the remainder of this chapter, we draw from our experiences utilizing youth advocates and working with community
partners to provide an assessment of both the promises and challenges of this strategy when conducting research with marginalized youth.

**PROMISES OF UTILIZATION**

When researchers pair with youth advocates at community agencies, the partnerships are often mutually beneficial for the researchers, the community agencies, and for the groups served by these agencies. One benefit for researchers relates to sampling and recruitment. When partnering with community agencies, researchers are able to access diverse and often hard-to-reach participants who fit their study criteria. In addition, youth advocates can assist researchers in developing rapport. Young people may be inherently mistrustful of adults, especially those acting in some official capacity due to negative experiences with teachers, child protective services personnel, juvenile justice system workers, and so on. These concerns are especially significant within criminological research, but also in research with LGBTQ populations. With regard to teachers, for example, queer youth report low teacher intervention in anti-gay bullying incidents (Kosciw et al., 2014) or teachers themselves participating in the bullying of LGBTQ students (see Castro & Sujak, 2014), while urban young women of color report their teachers to be relatively ineffectual at, and unconcerned with, intervening in instances of sexual harassment on school grounds (Miller, 2008). Such instances do not engender trust in the same adults tasked with keeping young people safe.

Despite issues associated with mistrust, young people can form deep and meaningful relationships with practitioners or volunteers at community agencies where they feel valued, appreciated, and at ease. Although a youth advocate’s job is not to influence youth to participate in the research, but rather to help them decide whether or not participation is in their own best interest, minors seem to feel more comfortable making this decision in the presence of an adult they feel they can trust. Even if they are not acquainted with the youth advocate before the date of the interview, knowing a neutral party is there who has their best interests at heart often stimulates a willingness to ask questions and seriously consider participation.

Youth advocates accustomed to working with youth can help bridge the gap between researchers and minors; for example, researchers may think they are explaining something clearly, but practitioners skilled at working with young people may be able to identify material that is unclear and help translate these concepts for the study participants, the researchers, or both.
Confusion may be a contributing factor for some youth who decline to participate, as well as those who may want to decline but instead choose to participate because they do not understand the process or their ability to say no. Thus, because a youth advocate’s role is to make sure youth are consenting freely and without coercion or undue influence, and because they do not hold a personal stake in the research, their help can ensure that only the youth who truly want to participate do so.

Community partners and the populations they serve can benefit from research partnerships. Data collection that happens on-site and at key community events (in our case, the LGBTQ youth leadership conference) can assist these agencies in identifying client needs that could improve services delivered, leading to greater client satisfaction and an increase in the number of clients served afterward. In our study, for example, youths recruited from the LGBTQ youth-serving agency benefitted from the trusting relationships they already had with the youth advocate and other program staff. Many of the youths recruited from the campus youth conference, on the other hand, had never been to the agency, and thus their decision to participate in the in-depth interview portion of our project introduced them to the organization, its staff, and its services. If prior use of the community agency’s services is not required for participation in the research, this may bring new youth through the door. The community agencies can therefore reach individuals they had not reached in the past, while potentially establishing deeper connections with currently serviced youth.

We suggest that regardless of whether the young person ever previously visited the community agency, the youth advocate should take a few minutes to explain the types of services that are available (both generally and at an agency where they may be employed). We also suggest that youth be given the contact information for various organizations that can provide future support, including the name and contact information of someone who will take their call and help orient them to each agency. The contact person may or may not be the youth advocate. In our study, the youth advocate played an integral role in running operations and support groups at the community center, so he was a main point of contact for youth who wanted to return to the center for services. At both the conference and on-site, our referral sheet listed many agencies that provided services, including relevant “point people” and their direct contact information.

Clearly, there are beneficent reasons for recruiting new youth to community agencies, but there are practical reasons as well. Agency success is often measured by how many youth are served and to what extent; researchers would do well to acknowledge this reality. Following the
conclusion of the research project, data generated may suggest that those agencies are doing their jobs well and should be recognized as such. For example, in our project, our youth participants had mostly positive things to say about the community organization where we conducted the interviews. We did not ask participants about the organization directly; rather, they sometimes offered this information during interviews. This was true even for youth who had not utilized the agency’s services, but had heard about them or were impressed with what they saw during their brief time participating in the interview and meeting some of the staff.

Perhaps most importantly, as a direct result of participating in the study, youth who were not aware of the community organization’s services or location were able to gain access to resources they may want or need. In our experience, about half of the youth who had not been to the community agency before their participation in the research began to utilize the services of the agency following the interview. In light of concerns pertaining to follow-up services in other studies with youth, this is an especially salient outcome. In particular, these concerns arise in reaction to research that uncovers instances of negative life occurrences such as interpersonal violence, past child abuse, and self-harming behaviors. For example, in her previous studies with marginalized youth (Miller, 2001, 2008), the second author utilized youth advocates, provided referral lists, and offered to assist study participants in contacting these services. However, she found no evidence that young people who participated formed meaningful relationships with the youth advocates when they did not have a pre-existing relationship with one another, nor did they take her up on the offer to make connections with agencies on the referral list. Thus, conducting research on-site with youth advocates already established in community organization structures may assist in fulfilling ethical obligations that many social scientists feel are necessary, and are mandated to uphold, in research. Bringing the youth to the space, seeing other young people utilizing services, and meeting the person with whom they may eventually form a relationship can help make study participants more willing to return and seek services in the future.

These processes foster collaborative relationships that extend beyond just the research study at hand. In our case, a report from our survey was shared by the Rutgers LGBTQ and Diversity Resource Center with community and school partners and the philanthropic branches of the local business community, which generated financial support for additional programming. More generally, researchers may want to become volunteers at these agencies (which can be personally rewarding), make in-kind or
monetary donations, contribute to drives, attend events, and so on. The first author became a volunteer at the community agency we partnered with and was there for at least several hours each week helping youth with high school tutoring, college and/or scholarship applications, resume writing, and other related skills. She also "hung out" and chatted or played games with youth, attended fundraising events, and donated clothes for job interviews. The second author also volunteered for the youth organization run by the youth advocate for two of her projects. We suggest that scholars who want to become involved draw from their own strengths or resources in identifying how best they can contribute to community organizations. On this note, research teams can work together on common goals, such as securing resources, funding, and help for initiatives and programming. Researchers often bring specialized knowledge and useful skills that can help community organizations, particularly if these organizations have small staffs and executive boards. Such skills include grant writing, data analysis, and evaluation experience, among others. In addition to potentially serving as consultants, researchers also can connect with other community members for additional projects using the networks they established through researcher-community agency partnerships. Thus, these relationships can be mutually beneficial, contributing to the successful development and maintenance of relationships with research partners.

These partnerships can exist at the interpersonal, agency, and university level. Many universities’ strategic plans increasingly emphasize local impact, community outreach, practitioners as project partners, interdisciplinary collaborations, and collaborations among departments and offices across campus. Partnering with non-academic people, groups, and agencies effectively removes research from the ivory tower and transforms it into something produced by a community of knowledgeable parties, sometimes referred to as “Town and Gown” partnerships. These help battle “the cult of the expert” by instead utilizing and valuing a “community of experts” (Cantor & Englot, 2013, pp. 121–122).

These suggestions are fully consistent with the social justice orientation held by many scholars who work with youth. Some prominent social scientists, including the prior president of the American Society of Criminology, have argued for outright advocacy and activism by researchers (Belknap, 2015). Partnering with real people conducting everyday work on the ground is helpful to provide a humanistic foundation for research agendas. Such collaborative work also can provide unique insight to those conducting research on or within organizations, which generally have implications for other work beyond any particular study with youth.
Despite the many potential benefits of collaboration between researchers and community organizations, or the utilization of youth advocates in research assent procedures, there are a number of challenges and potential pitfalls. During the design phase of research with youth, it is important to conceptualize how to engage in meaningful collaboration. One way to do so is to invite the community organization to provide input on the research instruments. They may have particular questions they would like a population to answer, perhaps regarding the agency’s function or the experiences of the populations they serve. These requested additions to research protocols may need to be revised in the event that they are leading or somehow not in line with data collection principles, but they still can be given consideration. For example, Browne (2008) explains how her project partners, who were stakeholders, suggested narrow survey questions that would help shape research that was consistent with stakeholders’ goals, sometimes at the expense of broader questions that might have encompassed those same goals. In her research, the stakeholders (1) desired data to help substantiate their claim that a particular LGBTQ-themed festival was necessary in their community, (2) vetoed the use of certain terms (such as queer) because of their own negative personal experiences with it, (3) asked for the gender and sexuality categories to be simplified because they wanted to be able to focus on the gay consumer, and (4) requested shortening the research instrument, whenever possible, because they did not want to scare people away from completing a lengthy questionnaire. We present these points of contention because issues such as institutional priorities, terminology, target populations, and instrument length are important considerations for nearly all researchers, regardless of study topic. Collaborative research teams can and should work together to find reasonable and mutually satisfying solutions to these differences in goals and/or approach.

Perhaps the most practical challenge is the possible strains on agency staff. Being a youth advocate takes time. It might take 5–15 minutes to complete assent procedures for each interview or survey, and schedules must be coordinated between the advocate’s agency work and research work. For example, if an interview with a youth is scheduled and then the staff member is sick, has a meeting, an emergency, or related scheduling conflict, the interview may have to be rescheduled, sometimes losing the young person from the study, but also disrupting the youth’s time and that of the researcher. And, if youth advocates have cleared their schedules because they committed to conducting the assent procedures, if youth (or
researchers) are late or do not show up at all, this may have domino effects into other aspects of their work schedules.

Youth advocates’ time may be further impacted if they engage in human subjects research training. Depending on the role of the agency’s staff in the research or the youth advocate’s role or qualifications, IRBs and/or funding agencies may require completion of human subjects training because they may define advocates as “project personnel.” Regardless of whether it is required, we recommend this approach since it ensures that the youth advocate understands the scope of human subjects protections, including informed consent and confidentiality procedures. However, this can add additional time and resource challenges, complicated further if such training costs money. Fortunately, major training organizations such as the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) allow key personnel to “affiliate” with colleges and universities for the purposes of completing human subjects training, even if those personnel do not possess an email address from that institution. Otherwise, youth advocates may have to register as “independent learners” and must pay to complete the training modules; even if project principal investigators fund advocate research training (which we argue they should), it is still an expense that can be prohibitive to the study. We suggest that if it appears there will be a cost barrier to training, the principal investigators contact their respective IRBs in an attempt to remedy the situation.

It is possible that youth advocates may act as gatekeepers to the youth they serve. This might be for practical reasons, such as wanting to avoid disruptions to their own workday or otherwise planned, already scheduled, youth programming. It may also be due to ethical motivations, such as not trusting the researchers, the intentions of their study goals, their ability to protect youth, or to keep researchers from including youth who might speak ill of their agency. However, across multiple studies, we have not encountered such issues. We believe this was due to the pre-existing relationships (established personally or through our project partners) we had with youth advocates, as well as advocates’ understanding of, and their appreciation for, the research. The youth advocates who agreed to participate in each project believed in the goals of the research, had cordial relationships with the researchers, and trusted that we would not harm them, their organizations, or the youth. This rapport fostered advocates’ commitment to helping with our projects. Furthermore, if youth advocates are hesitant to serve for practical reasons, basic accommodations can be made, such as agreeing that certain days or times of the week set aside for other programming are not available for surveys or interviews. Other scholars
who utilize youth advocates in research with LGBTQ youth may experience youth advocate or service provider gatekeeping. For example, D’Augelli and Grossman (2006) faced initial hesitation from service providers concerned that the study would alienate, pathologize, or discourage youth from seeking services, but this subsided when the researchers developed partnerships with the community agencies by sharing information, maintaining consistent contact, and teaming up to develop programming.

One of the most difficult issues facing collaborative partnerships with community organizations is frequently found in research collaborations: who “owns” the data and results? Who gets to determine what purposes it is used for? Obviously, we highly discourage entering into any partnership solely for the career advancement of the researchers. We suggest committing to sharing meaningful findings with project partners—particularly findings that are requested—and providing data in a format useful for project collaborators, such as briefing papers and reports written for lay audiences. This involves sharing drafts with project partners, committing to follow-up analyses, and considering changes desired by partners. This can be a time-consuming endeavor, and one that researchers will not necessarily get “credit” for during institutional promotion, tenure, or merit evaluations. In addition, researchers should consider offering to be of service in translating the research findings into policies and practices, and assisting the agency with grant applications based on evidence from the new data.

It is also essential to create reasonable timelines on which all parties can agree. Data entry, cleaning, and analyses can take time, especially when researchers have other projects and teaching obligations to balance. Community partners may not be familiar with the back end of the research process, and thus may be unaware of the oft-lengthy time to research completion. It is thus important that researchers explain these processes clearly, so that agencies and project partners are aware that reports cannot be produced instantly and that there may be unexpected delays along the way. That said, such delays should not be dependent on, for example, peer-reviewed publication of findings. We are aware of the publication pressures facing scholars in academia today, but remind researchers that community collaborators help facilitate the work we do.

The release of findings should not be conflated with the release of data, particularly identifiable data. Community organizations should not be given access to raw data due to conflicts of interest or confidentiality considerations. Sharing raw data does not protect participant confidentiality, even though it might be helpful for the organization to know which clients are experiencing particular issues. However, if there are discernable
patterns that are obvious from the initial data, or if researchers can provide the realistic range of what participants experience, early release of such information might be useful. Staff at community organizations may not fully understand that IRB requirements are legally binding and may interpret restrictions as attempts to exclude them. Adequate attention to and clarification of these issues must occur early on and be revisited, as necessary, in order to reduce confusion, misinformation, and incorrect assumptions made by partners and researchers.8

One must also consider the basic issue of who pays for the research. Just as would be the case in any other research scenario, parties may decide to split costs depending on whose goals they are primarily serving. Even in the case of equal partnerships, researchers’ institutional resources are a potentially valuable resource. For example, many faculty have start-up funds, professional development funds, internal grants, access to funded research assistants, and so on, which they can marshal to complete research projects with community agencies. In comparison, community organizations may have to do substantial fundraising or budgetary re-working to support small-scale studies that cost a few thousand dollars. Such contributions on the part of the researcher also takes into consideration the fact that youth advocates may not spend money on the research, but must still give of their time. Indeed, time can actually be harder to come by than money for many community service workers. As long as researchers and agencies understand the time and resources required of each partner, research teams will be better able to allocate work and set expectation guidelines; in so doing, transparency and open communication are required.

Issues relating to ownership and control of information can be especially tricky if the research results reflect poorly on the agency itself. Interviewees may specifically state that the organization is not engaging in helpful work or is outright harming them. Related, the problems the organization claims are occurring among their target population may not be borne out by the data. Although this did not occur in any of our studies with youth, we can imagine other scenarios where this might happen, and this in turn could disrupt or terminate collaborations between agencies, funders, and researchers.

Finally, each of the above issues can be further complicated by staff turnover. We experienced this multiple times during our project with LGBTQ youth, and it led to a variety of research challenges. For example, due to a change in agency personnel after our study’s first year, we needed to identify and familiarize a new youth advocate with the project, and for her to complete human subjects training. We then needed to submit
requests for approval of these changes to our university’s IRB. Another challenge that may present itself is that new staff may not have the same personal relationships with youths in the organization the previous staff member had, which affects levels of trust and rapport. In addition, it can be challenging for new staff — who already face the tasks of familiarizing themselves with a new organizational context, new colleagues, and new clients — to add the responsibilities of serving as youth research advocates. Most notably, changes in leadership at the organizations we partner with can necessitate renegotiating the terms of the collaboration. We found that it was critical to revisit a Memorandum of Understanding with our partners on an annual basis, to ensure that all parties were collaboratively informed. These practices can be challenging at times; they can be time-consuming and fraught with misunderstandings and tensions, as the shared understandings between the original partnered group may not find replication with new organizational leaders.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Undertaking research with youth, especially marginalized youth, is vitally important to better understand their experiences and social worlds. It is also a way to inform policies, practices, and social change efforts that can best offer support and ameliorate their marginalization. One of the major challenges we face, as criminologists studying LGBTQ and other young people’s lives, is likely shared by other childhood researchers — the fact that disclosure of research themes and goals to parents has the potential to place youths in harm’s way. Rather than avoid conducting research with minors, we offer here a strategy we find particularly useful in research with adolescents: working closely with youth advocates, and doing so in the context of community agency partnerships. Federal human subjects research guidelines permit such arrangements in lieu of parental consent, and researchers can articulate clearly to their IRBs why these processes are sometimes necessary.

The benefits of working with youth advocates, especially within community agencies that successfully serve the populations under investigation, are many. For researchers, this includes practical benefits such as sampling, recruitment, and rapport-building, as well as security in the knowledge that youths’ participation in the research is minimally harmful and truly has the potential to result in concrete benefits for youth at personal and institutional levels. For agency partners, the research can provide systematic
information that allows them to better serve the youth they work with, it can bring new youth through the door, and it can serve as a mechanism for fundraising. Finally, such arrangements can provide youth study participants with an opportunity to assess the benefits and costs of participating in research with the assistance of a trusted or trustworthy adult. Additionally, youth advocates in these settings provide “safe space” research locations and offer new information about local services and supports youth may choose to make use of afterward.

Working with youth advocates and community agencies in social science research has much promise, but also is ripe for missteps. To maximize the potential of this work, three basic tenets serve well: reciprocity, respect, and communication/understanding. Sometimes, not everyone’s needs can be met by participating in social science studies of youth, and collaboration is not possible or productive. However, we hope that the considerations and suggestions in this chapter will help scholars and other parties successfully navigate potential collaborations with youth advocates and youth-serving community agencies. We find such collaborations rewarding for both our scholarship and our commitments to social justice for young people.

NOTES

1. Our discussion here focuses on research with adolescents. For researchers working with younger populations, there are undoubtedly different and additional considerations.

2. We use this acronym to stand for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning,” as well as use it as an umbrella term that encompasses other sexual minority young people who may use different terms.

3. Some researchers studying queer youth who cited federal guidelines and safety concerns still faced uphill battles getting IRB approval (Gray, 2009), and this is precisely why we propose utilizing youth advocates as a promising solution.

4. Indeed, only 11 percent of youth in Mustanski’s (2011) study of mental health problems among LGBT youth said that answering the study questions were “more uncomfortable than a typical visit to [their] physician, doctor, psychologist, or counselor” (p. 681).

5. Our IRB approval did not specify that we need to keep the city anonymous, but we understand that some studies of youth are required to.

6. We did discuss the possibility that students could have forged their parents’ signatures to attend the event (or participate in the survey). However, we had no way to verify this and accepted school personnel’s screening of permission slips.

7. We also installed tabletop partitions at the desks to ensure survey participants’ privacy.
8. Of course, faculty must remain in line with their institution’s guidelines, as well as applicable local, state, and federal laws.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Meda Barker and Danielle Shields, who assisted with the research. We also appreciate the support of our project partners, the Hetrick-Martin Institute of New Jersey and Newark Public Schools. We received financial support from the School of Criminal Justice and the Chancellor’s Office at Rutgers University-Newark for study participant payments. We extend our deepest gratitude to the Youth Advocates and community agencies who have played such vital roles in our research over the years.

REFERENCES


