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Ethical Processes and Dilemmas during Research with Youth on Cyber-Risk

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Abstract: In this article, we reflect on the ethical processes and dilemmas we encountered in almost a decade of qualitative research with teenagers about digital technologies and cyber-risk. Our research underscores both the opportunities and challenges of teenagers' engagements with digital technologies, including cyberbullying and image-based sexual harassment and abuse (i.e., non-consensual sexting), on popular social media platforms. Our current research explores teenagers' experiences with cyber-risk during the COVID-19 pandemic, including managing homeschooling (due to lockdowns), online addiction, mental health challenges, and encounters with disinformation and misinformation. We discuss our experiences with focus group facilitation and one-to-one semi-structured interviews, specifically our reflections on ethical processes encountered in the field, such as fostering rapport with young participants given the significant age gaps and our lack of knowledge at times, regarding digital technologies or topics like image-based sexual abuse. We also discuss our experiences conducting research with teenagers under the new capacity to consent ethical framework, which positions children and youth as often having agency to consent to research independently from their parents or legal guardians. Here, we detail reflections on navigating a new approach and highlight some of the considerations arising from ascertaining assent and consent. Centralizing issues of developing rapport, trust, and ethical processes related to interactional dynamics during interviews, the paper provides insights and possible strategies for those conducting research with children and youth.

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While qualitative researchers continue to meaningfully reflect on ethical processes and dilemmas for those conducting research with youth, knowledge remains stagnant. In this article, we reflect upon a decade of experiences conducting qualitative research on cyber-risks with diverse youth in their "tweens" and teens, through methods such as focus groups and semi-structured qualitative interviews. We use the term "cyber-risk" with the aim of not reifying notions of technology through naïvely optimistic or "rose-tinted" language, nor of demonizing technology by focusing solely on the potential for harm that can often accompany its use. This itself is an ethical decision, to foreground instead the *complex* and *nuanced* voices of youth regarding their experiences engaging online, especially with social media platforms (SMPs). Centering the voices of youth in qualitative research is an ethical decision (Billett 2012). Our goal here is not to simply critique how research ethics boards operate (van den Hoonaard 2001; Haggerty 2004), nor is it to explore issues of cyberbullying, image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), or other forms of cyber-mediated conflict and harm (Ringrose et al. 2022). Instead, through our reflections on conducting research, we explore ethical processes and dilemmas encountered during research with youth; stories that we feel have not been told and which may help those planning research with children and youth anticipate the potential challenges and learn of recent developments, such as the relatively new capacity to consent framework.

As often noted by ethnographers, what happens in the field is often unanticipated, with an array of ethical considerations that continuously, quite sharply at times, confront the researcher. In the field, we need to adapt, respond, pivot, and otherwise *react* in moments and situations that require different skill-sets than those that carefully produced an ethics application from the relative comfort of a desk. In this article, the challenges of navigating ethical processes in the field are examined, including those related to fostering rapport with young participants given the significant age gaps (which varies between the authors) and our lack of knowledge, at times, regarding digital technologies. As noted, we also discuss our experiences conducting research with teenagers under the new "capacity to consent" ethical framework, which positions children and youth as often having agency to consent to research independently from their parents or legal guardians. Here, we detail reflections on navigating a new approach and highlight barriers and challenges related to assessing assent and consent. We also consider issues of developing rapport, trust, and ethical processes related to interactional dynamics during interviews.

We proceed by providing a brief overview of our research projects, with a particular focus on our current research examining youth experiences with cyber-risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. We then outline the relatively recent turn to a capacity to consent framework that applies to the latter project. To help ground and contextualize the reflections that follow, we offer a brief overview of published articles engaging with ethics in qualitative research with children and youth. Next, we highlight some of the ethical dilemmas and processes we have encountered in recent years. Our goal is ultimately not to offer a roadmap providing solutions for the issues we have encountered but to raise awareness and generate dialogue about them. However, this in itself—a tendency to outline the problems and not point to solutions—is an issue we have identified across the literature and upon which we reflect.

The Projects

While the second author has some experience with focus group research involving youth in Hong Kong, and has reflected on ethical issues related to conducting this research (see Adorjan 2016), we focus here on our Canadian research on youth and cyber-risk, including an initial focus group study of teenagers with the goal of capturing experiences with cyberbullying, IBSA, but also opportunities and benefits of using information communications technologies (boyd 2014; Haddon and Livingstone 2017). Our reflections include our current project on youth and cyber-risk during the COVID-19 pandemic, using semi-structured interviews. As we will explain, the pivot from focus groups to one-on-one interviews was an ethical decision in itself.

The second and third authors, with the help of several research assistants, conducted 35 focus groups in 2015-2016 with 115 youth, all aged between 13 and 19 years old, with the average age of the sample being 15 years old. We held open-ended (semi-structured) discussions about what technologies (including SMPs like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat) teenagers were using at the time, followed by several questions about their experiences using these technologies. These questions targeted a range of issues, including privacy and privacy management, parental mediation and surveillance by parents and schools alike, and experiences with cyberbullying and sexting (with a focus on IBSA and harassment). The focus group methodology behind our work is detailed in Adorjan and Ricciardelli (2019a) and related work (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019b; Ricciardelli and Adorjan 2019). Our reflections highlight complex ethical moments that formed during this work. We recall the challenges associated with asking teenagers about sensitive topics, such as the distribution and reception of nude images, within the context of a focus group. As part of our recruitment strategy, we had permission from various school boards to recruit for two rounds of focus groups; one in an urban, Western Canadian region we dubbed "Cyber City," and one in a rural, Atlantic Canadian region we dubbed "Cyberville."

Our current project, and the one we most focus on in this article, examines teen experiences and reflections from the pandemic through a series of one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, with an emphasis on the role of technology in producing opportunities and challenges.[1] While the project is currently in the stage of data coding and analysis, we reflect here upon our collective experiences conducting 30 interviews in Cyber City and 43 in Cyberville. Recruitment occurred in collaboration with a few third-party groups, including local school boards and non-profit organizations, one of which specifically serves the needs of gender non-binary and trans youth in the community. Based on our ability to connect with various community organizations, our sample is currently comprised of 37% trans and non-binary youth; 63% White, with others identifying as Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latino, and a portion of participants not responding to this question. Participants ranged from 12 to 19 years old.[2] Initially, interviews in Cyber City were being conducted by the second author, the principal investigator, with the first author serving as a lead research assistant on the project, joining the research team, engaging in recruitment, interviewing, and conducting data analysis and dissemination. In Cyberville, the third author and a lead research assistant oversaw participant recruitment and interviewing.

Following the relatively brief overview of literature, we examine various ethical aspects of our research, with reflections offered from the authors to help contextualize and situate experiences and dilemmas encountered in the field.

Qualitative Youth Research and Ethics

Qualitative researchers have discussed ethical encounters and dilemmas in the field, including (and perhaps especially) tensions with research ethics boards/institutional review boards (van den Hoonaard 2001; 2002), managing insider/outsider dynamics (Adorjan 2016; Eriksson 2023), research with powerful criminal justice authorities (Lillie and Ayling 2021; Ricciardelli 2022; Sandhu 2023), and with people who have experienced trauma (Spencer 2016; Todd-Kvam and Goyes 2023). Although not an exhaustive list, conversely, here, we engage more directly with research on ethical issues related to research with youth. Our research focuses on youth and cyber-risk, but this wider literature remains relevant insofar as the ethical issues resonate with our own but also reveal unconscious biases.

Within the literature on youth to date, there is a significant emphasis placed on the need to foreground the social construction of youth when considering how youth are perceived and responded to in society, or how researchers consider youth when planning their research. Examining ethics in youth social capital research, Billett (2012:43) stresses how framing youth solely as consumers and not producers of social capital undercuts a more complete

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[1] We considered explicating in further detail ethical dilemmas related to the earlier focus group project, though our current project (youth and cyber-risk during the pandemic) is mostly centered in this article given limited space and, in our collective experiences, a richer array of ethical encounters in the field.

[2] As we note later, while our inclusion criteria were for teens 13-19, some organizations referred to us participants who were 12, who, based on our capacity to consent screening protocol (see below), were permitted to participate in the study.

understanding of the processes associated with youth social capital, and indicates a "failure to acknowledge the complexity of youth life."[3] Youth have agency. Yet, youth tend to be framed, by both researchers and in public discourses, as inherently vulnerable and, in sociological terms, lacking agency. Lesko (1996:140, 142) stresses how youth are "social categories" subject to "historical processes" and moreover, that these social constructions "masquerade as universal and neutral." Lesko also challenges how ideas of biology and age, and their application during adolescence—or the process of "coming of age," produce a range of oversimplified and essentializing characterizations of youth. Adults in general, including researchers, yield a "clear positional superiority…over adolescents based on age" (Lesko 1996:149). Age often acts to oversimplify notions of youth (im)maturity, identity, and, as we discuss, capacity to provide informed consent when considering participating in research. Brooks (2012:183) similarly notes that "as the literature in the field of youth studies attests, young people are often constructed by politicians, policymakers, and social commentators as 'not adults' or 'adults-in-the-making.'" Thorstensson Dávila (2014:27), quoting Raby (2007:48), similarly argues that "while youth is valorized in North American culture, teenagers are routinely subject to discourses that construct them as being at-risk, as social problems, and as incomplete." There are many assumptions and stereotypes, then, drawn from wider societal discourses, steering our understandings and associations of childhood and youth.

Dominant discourses of youth can affect how youth researchers, and research ethics boards, set their parameters of who is included and excluded, presumptions regarding maturation, et cetera. As Billett (2012:45) observes:

> The problem is that defining what a "vulnerable" population is can be difficult…They are often difficult to reach (due to unwillingness to participate in research) but can also be left out because of the problem researchers face in obtaining ethics approval to research these vulnerable groups…creating an inevitable "muteness" around their experiences.

However, as we make evident, these presumptions about youth as "inaccessible" and perhaps "unwilling" to participate are not always valid. In fact, research ethics boards have gravitated toward a capacity to consent framework (see below) for research with youth to, arguably, ensure they have their agency recognized, and are not made less vulnerable by any person removing their agency. On the other hand, some of the literature we reviewed referred to difficulties engaging with research ethics boards and how their policies can place youth as disadvantaged (Ensign 2003; Billett 2012; Brooks 2012). Brooks' (2012:180) critique of research ethics boards, for instance, echoes the literature: "formal submissions to ethics…cannot always anticipate the ethical dilemmas that may arise." Earlier scholarship has also discussed how ethics boards can often be comprised of members lacking expertise on qualitative research, limiting the appropriateness and rigor of reviews for proposals framed by qualitative approaches (see Ensign 2003). The critique seems to be less prominent, however, in literature penned over the last decade or so, which may be broadly representative of a more concerted effort being made by ethics boards to diversify their committees with members from an array of methodological and theoretical traditions.

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[3] Billett (2012:43) cites Yang (2007:1), who defines social capital as "the ties that are formed in everyday interactions, which can help us get ahead or seek help in times of need."

Recent reflections emphasize the value of ethics as a process that unfolds during research, not a static set of protocols and guidelines sedimented after a research ethics board approves a project to commence. For example, Woodgate, Tennent, and Zurba (2017) argued that considerations of ethics in research with children and youth need to be made beyond ethics board requirements and protocols, with researchers adopting a sustained mindfulness presence. They explain the need for an "acknowledgement of the importance of 'everyday' ethics," through which we create the "potential for enhancing the moral and relational imperatives through shifting the dynamics around ethics toward being participatory" (Woodgate et al. 2017:6). The approach has developed in response to earlier scholars' calls to reflect on "the process aspects of what has taken place" during research (Woodgate et al. 2017:6 quoting Rooney 2015:82; see also Warin 2011). Some argued that participatory methods (including photovoice, brainstorming, mapping, drawing, etc.) are the most appropriate ways to empower and respect young people in the research process, especially when realized through ongoing ethnographic engagement (Tickle 2017). And yet, just because a method is labeled as or intended to be more participatory, *is it*? Does the method truly disrupt the power relationship by giving young people more agency over their voice in the research process?

Attention to the *hows* of qualitative research and the significance of adaptation to circumstances in the field have led Duncan and colleagues (2009) to promote the idea of ethical mindfulness, which "involves the recognition of ethically important moments, giving credence to the feeling of being 'uncomfortable' about an event, being able to articulate what makes something an ethical matter, being reflexive, and having courage" (Duncan et al. 2009:1692 quoting Guillemin and Gillam 2006:31). And yet, while we acknowledge Duncan and colleagues' efforts to move toward a more relational, reflexive approach to ethics in research with youth, stereotypes often undercut their efforts. For instance, they firmly assert that "young participants have less life experience" (Duncan et al. 2009:1694). The relatively short, passing sentiment seems innocuous, and may even be seen as generally true to many readers, including researchers. Such statements capture some of the most pervasive mischaracterizations of youth scholars' critiques. Young people appear to be collectively infantilized through such language, where their experiences or capacities are minimized on account of their age. Is it true to claim that youth have "less life experience?" Perhaps, if solely considering numerical age. However, some youths have had particularly difficult life experiences or experiences more associated with adults. This again speaks to the problem of relying on age in rendering presumptions regarding youth experience and youth voice (Schelbe et al. 2015). Some statements ironically contradict the very "ethical mindfulness" promoted about research with children and youth.

Several scholars who studied youth and ethics in qualitative research center on how trust and rapport are established and maintained. Here, too, the *hows* (i.e., specific processes and exigencies) are largely unspecified. For instance, Guillemin and colleagues (2016:370) argued:

> guidelines emphasize the integrity and trustworthiness of researchers as…crucial…However, they do not specify what this comprises, how researchers are to demonstrate it, and how it can be assessed either by research ethics committees or by potential…participants.

Their focus is heavily on what the issues are, with comparatively little focus on what to do to resolve such issues; a theme we found across the articles we reviewed on youth and ethical issues in the field, where diagnoses of problems dominated over possible approaches and solutions. Guillemin and colleagues (2016:371) offered trust may be considered both a noun and a verb, "that is both something you aim for and actively do," and advocated for a *relational* approach to trust (Guillemin et al. 2016:373), which offsets the focus of gaining trust from participants, or projecting trust toward participants, to a more processual view of mutually reinforcing trust during the course of research. Considerations of trust apply in all phases of research, including the early design phases of research planning (Guillemin et al. 2016:375). Even during relatively short interviews with adolescents (roughly 30 minutes to 1.5 hours), rapport can develop quickly. Laenen (2009:326), who interviewed adolescents with emotional and behavioral disorders using group-based qualitative methods, found "participants tended to let down their guard during the conversations, despite their initial reserve." This speaks to the *temporality of rapport and trust-building* in the researcher-participant relationship; time and the flow of conversation can have implications for how comfortable any participant feels in an interaction. In this article, we develop the idea of "fast trust," referring to how rapport and trust (with small "r" and "t") may be fostered over short periods, when researchers conduct interviews rather than protracted ethnography.

Good intentions alone are insufficient to address the effects of hegemonic discourses of youth and age. Such discourses tend to affect research. While the field is not oblivious to these challenges—in fact, far from it—*how* exactly to do research differently and in a manner that places young participants in more active, agentic positions remains inadequately addressed. As Lohmeyer (2020:39) argues, youth researchers have:

> develop[ed] and adopt[ed] a variety of techniques and ethical principles that attempt to position young people as active research participants. However, these methods and principles have not solved the challenges of youth participation, or the problems of power in the researcher-participant relationship in qualitative research more generally.

For Lohmeyer (2020:45), these ethical dilemmas surrounding asymmetrical power relations are "unsolvable." Others, however, have offered various approaches. Meloni, Vanthuyne, and Rousseau (2015), for instance, advocate for the application of an approach grounded in "relational ethics." They posit: "to critically rethink notions of voice and agency, and to redefine childhood within wider contexts of interdependence...we also point to the need to critically reflect on how these voices are produced, and where they are located" (Meloni et al. 2015:107). By extension, the authors assert that ethics itself may be defined as the mere "performative practice of intersubjectivity, relative to different modes of belonging" (Meloni et al. 2015:108). Perhaps one approach to move toward an effective relational ethics is a capacity to consent framework for research. In our experience, this framework, which is still somewhat new in qualitative research, is increasingly being recognized by research ethics boards. This constitutes a significant, albeit workload-intensive step (discussed below). We next turn to questions about the processes involved when applying capacity to consent in the field—the lack of knowledge being the root of the labor-intensive process.

Capacity to Consent, Youth Voice, and Agency

In recent decades, university research ethics boards (institutional review boards in the US) mandated parents to provide consent for research to be conducted with their children as participants. Children are positioned as an inherently vulnerable population. Due to this positioning, children and youth could *assent* to their participation, which was often required too, but were seen as having an *incapacity* to consent directly to research of their own accord. The notion that children and youth are incapable of demonstrating their capacity to consent is rooted in longstanding social norms and discourses. Such attitudes construct a view of youth as having limited maturity and thus, a greatly diminished capacity to fully comprehend the decision-making process that surrounds consent in research. Schelbe and colleagues (2015:507) note: "children's competence as research participants has now been recognized, whereas they were previously viewed as incompetent, passive, conforming, immature, incomplete, and highly vulnerable participants whose participation would be unreliable, susceptible to adult suggestion, and ultimately provide less legitimate knowledge." The capacity to consent framework encourages researchers to appreciate how teenagers, or even children of at least eight years old, can provide consent to participate in research, independent of their parents or guardians. The framework is influenced by the findings of developmental researchers, who noted that youth of 14 or so years old are mature enough to provide consent, though some argue children around eight or nine years of age are equally capable (Nadin et al. 2018). This involves demonstrating they are aware of not only the subject and scope of research, but they have the *ability to signal their independent willingness to participate*, appreciating details such as how researchers will protect their privacy, anonymize research findings, and so forth.

For our current study of youth pandemic experiences, we drafted an ethics application requiring parental consent and youth assent for all participants between the ages of 13 and 19 years old. In the past, we have incorporated potential participants who are legal adults, such as, for example, 19-year-old undergraduate students, under the "youth" umbrella (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019a). We did not, however, think that consent could be applied to younger teenagers, particularly those close to 13 years old. The feedback we received from the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board was both refreshing and exciting, as we were informed that applications with a capacity to consent framework were now being recognized and accepted for projects focusing on children and youth. In fact, we were actively encouraged to revise our protocols, including not just our letter of information but also our consent form and capacity to consent protocol. Ethics approval for our work was simply based on the understanding of a particular component of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2 2022:40), which asserts that "rather than an age-based approach to consent, this Policy advocates an approach based on decision-making capacity as long as it does not conflict with any laws governing research participation."[4]

Through a capacity to consent framework, decision-making capacity is treated as a process involving discussion with younger participants to determine their understanding of the study, its risks, benefits, and confidentiality. This is determined

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[4] Tri-council refers to the three primary funding bodies for publicly funded research in Canada: Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. See: https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/documents/tcps2-2022-en.pdf. Retrieved July 07, 2025.

before commencing the interview by the interviewer and guided by a pre-designed protocol; no other source of verification is involved. This same protocol is read through with the participant, and care is taken to ensure all research protocols and processes are understood. The way this is accomplished includes having participants read the protocol back to the researchers in short segments that are discussed to ensure comprehension. Information letters and consent forms for the project were developed with attention to different levels of reading and comprehension abilities. Linked to reading comprehension level, we used the Flesch–Kincaid readability test to guide the writing of these documents.[5]

Our study was required to undergo ethics review by both the participating school boards and the CFREB. The ethics application process required the drafting of separate information letters and consent forms for youth and their guardians. The consent form would be reviewed with participants before interviews commenced. However, a separate capacity to consent protocol was designed to determine individual levels of understanding in younger participants, regarding confidentiality, data management, and their rights as participants. Some of the organizations and school boards involved had their own guidelines for requiring parental consent, which guided the design of our own consent procedures during data collection. We presented our plan for determining capacity to consent for younger teenagers, yet we were required to follow the guidelines of school boards and organizations, some of whom required parental consent and youth assent.

As we planned our project, we held active discussions about how we would be able to ultimately determine a participant's capacity to consent. In determining a suitable strategy, we found *defining what understanding looks like* important. In the case of Nadin and colleagues (2018:140), understanding must encapsulate a clear comprehension of "the study purpose and procedures." In their study, this entailed participants actively "explaining the nature of the study and the risks, benefits, and consequences of participating" (Nadin et al. 2018:140). However, this approach may still leave researchers with somewhat obvious questions about what signs, signals, words, or actions can be recognized as indications of genuine comprehension. Researchers may survey what is said and how it is said. Monosyllabic answers to questions of consent and understanding of project protocols (which we found expected among younger teens) may, in fact, signal a lack of consent (Brooks 2012:182), or signal the need for further questions to elaborate their understandings. Adjusted reading levels of information and consent forms notwithstanding, our experiences with younger tweens and teens in previous projects raised concerns about the extent to which verbal recall of the required sections of the protocol is a sufficient metric for measuring capacity to consent in any given case. Similarly, the problem of identifying when there is an *incapacity* to consent equally raises questions. Where a participant was, however, deemed not to have the capacity to consent independently, our protocol outlined the following response:

> In cases where participants are not able to affirm their capacity to consent (i.e., where their responses

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[5] Flesch–Kincaid readability tests are geared to assess the ease or difficulty in understanding specific passages in the English language. The scores range from "very easy to read" for those in late elementary school (grade 5), up to "extremely difficult to read" geared more for university graduates. They can be used to calibrate the text used in letters of information and consent for research with children and youth to help ensure clarity and transparency (see Eastwood, Snook, and Luther 2015).

> to questions to summarize in their own words various sections of the consent form demonstrate a lack of understanding), we will *with care* inform youth that they will not be able to proceed with the research at the moment but have some options to consider. One option simply not to participate, the other to review an assent form and seek parental consent.

To date, we have not had a participant unable to affirm their capacity to consent, and there are a number of potential reasons as to why. One such reason is that this group of participants may have simply found clarity in both the consent form and our discussions of it. Moreover, there is also the potential for selection bias; those youth eager to participate may have had more experience with research projects in general, or some degree of awareness at least, of what they entail. If so, it is possible that when recruiting younger teenagers, we are missing those less likely to be able to demonstrate the capacity to consent.

As mentioned, for youth who do not indicate a capacity to consent, parental consent may be pursued. This raises further ethical questions—are we, in such cases, defaulting to a presumption that youth are unable to demonstrate capacity to consent (which we argue would be problematic), or should there be more room to determine this beyond the particular time and place when an interview is to be held? In practice, the second author reflects on his experiences conversing with younger teenagers to determine capacity to consent:

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> It may well be a cardinal mistake to assume that just because a potential participant has signed off on a consent form, they understand and consent to all aspects of the research indicated in the form they signed. I recall several younger teenagers really pumped to participate, eager to share their experiences during the pandemic, based on the initial letters of information circulated by the organizations. All these participants seemed quite knowledgeable about the project and aspects related to it, such as confidentiality, what happens with the interviews, and so forth. Yet, younger teenagers are often not very talkative. They are, based on my observation of their body language, willing to sit down with me for an interview and seem comfortable being there. We read the protocol together, and I get them to tell me key points back to me in their own words, stopping frequently to ask if they understand or if they have any questions. They often repeat the same words, and I'm trying to get beyond just the words to *how they're saying them* to get a sense of understanding. They often nod silently or shake their head "no," indicating they don't have any questions, and we ultimately proceed, but other ways to determine their understanding elude me. It's a bit much, perhaps, to ask a younger teen to state in different words what "confidentiality" means or explain in their own words how their data is protected after the end of the interview. In the end, we as researchers, sitting down with our participants, are responsible for making a final call to green light an interview or not. Perhaps the ideal scenario is for a social worker with expertise in interacting with children and youth or a child psychologist to come in to vet all this, but, of course, that is not likely feasible. I feel competent in conducting an interview with a young person, but this is more difficult. I wonder if there are any cases in the literature of researchers grappling with *incapacity* to consent—how this is identified and best responded to. I haven't found any to date, and maybe that is telling us more than we think.
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Billett (2012:44) observes that "existing research guides" are unclear in their guidance on "when and how a young person displays…competencies [to have the capacity to consent]." Based solely on the citations Billett provides, it seems there has been awareness since at least the 1990s, if not earlier, of the "fogginess" of how we are both assessing and engaging in the processes that surround youth capacities to consent. Consider this particular observation: "the conviction that parental and guardian consent is always in the best interest of a young person has come to be questioned by some researchers" (Billett 2012:45 quoting Gaylin and Macklin 1982). Researchers demonstrate an active engagement with questions about parental consent since at least the late 1970s (e.g., Gaylin 1977). Despite decades of attention to this area, little progress has been made. One line of inquiry would ask *why* this is the case. While it is encouraging that the TCPS2 has more recently rendered explicit the capacity to consent framework, significantly more training is likely needed to navigate the challenges of determining it in participants. Billett (2012:44) also notes that situations where parental consent is sought have traditionally been conceived "as a way of protecting young people," and while this certainly may be true in many cases, it is equally plausible that requiring parental consent is motivated by researchers hoping to protect themselves as opposed to ensuring that the participant understands their involvement. This potentiality is rendered more plausible still when one considers the wider context of legal liabilities, with the parents or guardians ultimately responsible for their children's involvement in any such work.

In their reflections on some of the ethical challenges that can unfold in studies with youth and children, Duncan and colleagues (2009:1693) detail their experiences of conducting a study on self-management of chronic illness. One participant had asked during the course of an interview "is my mum going to hear this or not?" to which the interviewer responded, "with a promise that his mother would not be able to listen to the interview" (see also Laenen 2009). This is an example of a particularly gray-area because, in theory, a researcher is right to give such assurances but in actuality, giving a cast-iron "promise" is perhaps reckless when researchers know there are contexts within which they have a duty to disclose the contents of an interview (i.e., where participants disclose the intent to commit a crime, or intention to harm someone). This reminded us of occasions during our interviews where teenagers asked us where and how the interview would be shared, which they often asked after the interview was completed. The capacity to consent framework protects youth from even disclosing their participation to parents or guardians, which is important, especially in projects that ask about youth experiences and behaviors that are illegal or may otherwise get them into trouble with their parents. Our project examining teens' COVID-19 experiences did not ask about illegal behavior, but did ask about experiences with parental responses to pandemic lockdowns and related experiences, which may raise sensitive if not distressing memories. However, our assurances are often centered on the fact that *researchers themselves* will not inform parents about their children's participation, nor the results of what they disclosed. Since we asked participants about their experiences of how their parents responded to the pandemic, this aspect of our design was significant. And yet we were, at times, surprised by situations where youth not only were very open with their parents about their participation but also had no qualms about conducting the interview with their parents present. The second author reflects:

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> The capacity to consent framework of our research with teenagers provided the opportunity for teenagers to *consent* to research rather than *assent*, with the understanding that parental consent is not required so long as capacity to consent is ascertained prior to the interview. One situation where all this was flipped on its head, so to speak, involved a planned remote interview where the participant emailed to say they were running behind, leaving school a bit late. The Zoom call came in at the scheduled time, but, to my surprise, the participant was in a car driven *by her mother*, who was her ride from school. The participant asked if it was okay to begin the interview while in the car's passenger seat, though I suggested we wait until they were home, which is how we proceeded. I did not voice my concern about the mother's presence, though my question about delaying the interview was based primarily on concern over that issue. Some of my questions asked directly about experiences with how parents responded during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether positive or negative. It is very likely that the participant's mother is highly supportive, and their relationship is a solid one based on mutual trust and respect, suggesting the parent's presence wouldn't "taint" the responses to my questions. Of course, this assumption is a big one, and it would in this case have been unethical to proceed based on said assumption.

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Overall, we are in strong support of the capacity to consent framework and its recognition of child and youth agency and voice. Still, the challenges in determining this in the field are worth considering in qualitative research, especially where projects involve researchers asking about youth experiences with parents or guardians.

Building and Maintaining Rapport and Trust

Here, we expand upon our reflections related to both our earlier focus group project and our current project examining youth pandemic experiences. Beginning with our focus group project, one of the more challenging aspects was developing rapport between researcher and participants, both because of the age gap between researchers and the teenage participants (senior research assistants were somewhat closer in age, but likely still perceived as "adults" by younger participants) and interactional dynamics that may be related to gender. Age and gender may also, in this case, be more relevant, as we asked teenagers about their experiences with sexting and later, as interviews progressed, we explored related areas, such as the involuntary reception from some female teens of "dick pics." The third author reflects here on her positionality and care over how this is approached within a focus group setting:

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> In my 20 years or so of conducting interviews, I have spoken with many people who identify as part of a vulnerable population, including youth, who are inherently vulnerable as minors, but also many made more vulnerable by their gender identity, sexuality, their Indigenous, or racialized status. To reflect, I start by explaining my own positionality—as a person and a researcher. Then, I reflect on the nuance of interviewing and conducting focus groups with youth, who are vulnerable in many ways, about sexting. I have long struggled with various realities, beyond the scope of this reflection, that have shaped who I am but more so have created a space where I try to recognize individuality and how each person has their own story impacting their actions, thoughts, and feel-

> ings. My own experiences taught me quickly about the ignorance of judgment and the need to encourage people to be who they are and how they need to be to feel whole. Beyond being a wife, I am a mother of a gender diverse teen, twin teenage boys, and a ten-year-old girl. I strive to understand the phenomenon from as close a firsthand experience as possible—to learn how different truths can hold true in one space and to develop insight to do some good in practices, in policies, by learning, or by giving voice.
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> When interviewing youth—particularly vulnerable youth who have been or became the victim (rather than the consenting participant) of sexting, who are racialized, or gender or sexually diverse—there is an inherent power imbalance that evades discussions based on the participant's truth and may create tension or uncertainties. But, taking away their agency further impedes their power—thus assent helps empower. In any interview, the initial duty of the interviewer is to create a safe space. Almost legally, we as researchers may do so through consent forms detailing the parameters of the discussion, the use and storage of the data, and most nuances about the conversation. The real safe space, however, is beyond a consent form. The safe space must be created within the rapport built, the trust enacted and promised, and the freedom to encourage a youth to be themselves, whoever and however they see themselves at that moment in the developmental journey.
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The second author's daughter was about five years old when he began conducting these focus groups, and he reflects similarly on issues of positionality and the importance of developing trust:

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> I did not know what to expect when sitting down with small groups (about five or six on average) and asking questions about social media platforms unfamiliar to me, and how I would broach topics such as sexting; me, a white, straight, middle-aged male academic interviewing female teenagers as young as 13. My own daughter was much too young to share the experiences many of our participants had, and I admit to feeling nervous about what sort of things she would be exposed to in a few short years, based on stories we heard about "dick pics" and non-consensual forms of image based sexual abuse. Of course, the questions were there in the interview schedule, but this failed to answer *how to ask* those questions. I later came to develop my own thinking about the creation of safe spaces, be it in the classroom or in the field. Trust takes time, and I found the best interviews developed a sort of "fast trust"—not the sort of deep bonding social capital you get with a very close friend or romantic partner, but sufficient for the purposes of an academic interview that delves into rather personal and meaningful experiences and understandings. Perhaps it is worth considering fostering a safe space/time not just safe spaces. It helped, of course, that our more personal questions regarding cyberbullying and sexting were positioned about midway in the interview schedule. We began with "warm-up" questions, what social media platforms are being used (if any), what is the draw to them, etc.
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Our experiences interviewing youth about emotionally charged topics such as IBSA (non-consensual sexting) involved an approach developed by Price (2002:276) called a laddered question technique. "Laddered questions" refer to "a technique for selecting the most appropriate level of question or researcher response to respondent dialogue, based on the premise that we share a common notion of what is likely to seem most intrusive during discourse." Irrespective of whether the semi-structured interview schedule has specific questions about IBSA, when, and if such questions should be part of an ethical process, laddering questions are part of the *how* of accomplishing the rapport required to ask such questions to build trust. Price (2002:273, emphasis added) astutely observes "not only must researchers use dialogue for an inquisitive purpose… they must also *legitimize their questions*, helping respondents to evaluate the place of the research and their part in it…and involve issues of power."

While our ethical attention is, understandably and necessarily, on our younger participants, we must also consider how engaging in qualitative research can be emotionally draining and challenging for the researchers themselves. As the third author details how:

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> Interviewing is essential emotional labor. For youth, I found their rationalities were at times difficult to comprehend without extensive explanation, and sometimes, they simply needed an opportunity to explain their thought processes, pressures, and ideas to show how their interpretations of the world resulted in their actions or thoughts. Doing qualitative research can shape the participants and researchers in different ways, in every interaction, and in every self-presentation. As a researcher, the need to be always present can be draining, and the interest in always hearing your speaker can be exhausting physically, socially, and cognitively. These realities are rarely spoken about in qualitative research. Yet, they are particularly salient when interviewing youth—the participant deserves undivided attention. The onus is on the interviewer to create a safe space centered around the youth that provides them comfort and freedom to be themselves without feeling judged. As an interviewer, if I were to be distracted, unfocused, or unsupportive, rapport would be negatively affected, and harm can result, which is particularly concerning when speaking to vulnerable people, and the power imbalance could easily suggest to the youth that they are lesser valued or not worthy of the required attention.
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The impressions we give as researchers, and their impact on our participants, are important to foreground (Goffman 1955; 1959). Our unconscious concerns and anxieties may reflect upon our participants, potentially discouraging lines of inquiry. Research ethics boards formally vet questions during the review process, but equally, if not more important, is *how* such questions are asked: are pauses taken when needed to provide a space for participants to adjust if disclosing a particularly emotionally impactful experience? The first author, a senior research assistant on our youth and cyber-risk during the pandemic research, reflects on these points below, beginning with a statement on his positionality:

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> I came to this project as somebody with a deep personal and professional interest in mental health. Not only have I experienced significant mental health challenges in my own life, some of which have led to hospitalizations, but I have also conquered those challenges and now work to support others in doing the same. In this sense, mental health is the body and soul of the work that I do. As an academic, I am very critical of the reach of the medical model as it relates to psychological suffering, which was an interesting dilemma to navigate during the project. In doing so, I also recognize that prior to this opportunity, I had virtually no experience in conducting qualitative interviews, which proved challenging at times. How-

> ever, I also came to this work with some strengths, such as my ability to relate to younger students and understand the dynamics of being a student during the pandemic. I lived and worked in Brazil as a teacher administering the International Baccalaureate program during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing instruction to students between the ages of 10 and 18 in history and social studies, as well as supervising the Extended Essay project. The government of the day in Brazil arguably ignored the global consensus from the scientific community on COVID-19, and so I came to this research with a unique perspective having observed mental health challenges as a teacher, which has since allowed me to reflect upon how COVID-19 may or may not have impacted these issues. It is also worth noting that Brazil has a very active digital culture; the use of technology and social media is very strongly embedded into the modern social fabric of the country and its various communities.
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The first author proceeds to reflect upon the challenges alluded to for junior scholars who might be new to conducting qualitative research:

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> In reviewing my transcripts for the interviews I have conducted over the past year, I recognized that I often struggled to navigate the question of "how far is too far?" when it came to needing to probe for further detail. We don't have much time during a 1:1 interview to really contemplate our decisions, and this can be very anxiety-inducing for new researchers. While I can put this down to experience and the amount of time spent practicing this particular qualitative method, it also presents somewhat of an ethical conundrum that I've rarely seen addressed in methodological scholarship. To some extent, I suppose that we almost need to "read the room" and gauge from a combination of context, topic—maybe even "vibes"—when it is most appropriate for us to probe deeper regarding a given topic. This had the unfortunate consequence of making me appear somewhat cold with participants at times, or as though I wasn't interested in hearing more about something they had shared. Furthermore, while I would consider myself to be quite perceptive of an individual's nonverbal cues, this does raise a broader question about how we make qualitative methodologies more inclusive for different groups of neurodivergent folks who, while navigating an interaction, may not easily be able to or who struggle to rely on such intuition. This is particularly true when we consider that it's rare for a qualitative researcher to stick exclusively to the script as laid out by the interview protocol. At times, I worried that the difficulties I had navigating these challenges in turn limited how much I could get out of an interaction with a participant.
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As a research team, we would go on to discuss our experiences conducting the interviews and the resultant transcripts. In the first author's case, it may have been that participants simply did not notice his reticence; he felt bound not to probe too deeply, concerned about violating our ethical protocols, yet wished to remain flexible in exploring directions participants felt comfortable with. Concern for the impressions we give came up in our reflective writing for this article. For the first author, this comes from a position of insecurity based on his perceived level of experience and position as a junior scholar. For the third author, similar concerns are reflected from a wealth of experience conducting not only interviews but ethnographies related to wider projects (see Ricciardelli 2022). How we interpret participant responses, including what they say and the body language used, is highly influenced by our own process of interpreting the "looking-glass self" (Cooley 1902). Consider the first author's reflection here:

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> Some of the last few interviews I conducted were with students from a more diverse range of ethnic and racial backgrounds. During these interviews, I perceived (at times) some difficulty in both understanding me as the interviewer and in their expressing themselves clearly in English. I found this difficult to navigate. In one interview in particular, a participant often recanted "like I said," or "like I mentioned before," in response to follow-ups that sought clarity on some of the responses given, and I could sense frustration with the interview process. This made me feel anxious and somewhat irritated. Similarly, the same barrier also made me feel as though I could not tap into the full range of experiences some participants had in relation to the questions at hand. Some responses were very limited or superficial, and I didn't always know how to seek more detail from them, as their initial response occasionally gave me little to work with.
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The first author could be correct that participants were "frustrated" about needing to repeat themselves, or it could also be a case of simply misreading the room, which is a challenging decision to make when so much of how qualitative researchers navigate their work is left to their own impressions and assumptions. The second author has also experienced concern during interviews about how a young participant receives the questions being asked, consistently monitoring not only the participant's body language but also his own "self-talk" about what is happening. Sometimes participants have surprised him revealing they were thinking of things quite different from what he surmised. Asked if any participants have any questions at the conclusion of their interview, a researcher expects questions about what happens with the data, anonymization of findings, et cetera. However, unexpectantly, in one instance, the young teen asked him "Do you have a cat?" (a cat's meow could be heard in the background at times during the interview). The second author tried his best not to miss the beat—"Yes, I do," he replied and proceeded to describe his cat, before steering the discussion back. Upholding an active and reflexive presence while conducting qualitative interviews is thus essential, including the anticipation of the unexpected. This raises an important question: when are participants veering away from the themes we wish to explore, and at what point is it appropriate to steer them back on track? Price (2002:273) remarks "the researcher has power over respondents…possibly drawing [them]…back to the focus of the interview if they stray." However, we may further ask what constitutes "straying" and how we determine where "steering" is required. In the case of the interview above, the question of the cat occurred at the end of the interview, so some digression, the second author deemed, was acceptable. When in doubt about what our participants are feeling or thinking, it is always a good idea to ask directly: "I have some more questions about that, are you alright to proceed?" "Do you need to take a minute break?" "Don't forget to let me know if you have any questions." "Remember you can skip any questions you do not wish to respond to and we can even stop the interview at any time."

At other points during our earlier study, questions arose regarding how much to probe in new directions, especially during some of our focus groups with female teenagers, where the regularity of their receiving "dick pics" was actively discussed. Probing, involving "questions or requests that ask the participant to provide additional information about their previous response," is a necessary, even essential, tool for enriching participant responses during interviews (Robinson 2023:382 quoting Given 2012). One of the group members referred to a plan they had to create a scrapbook of "dick pics" sent to them, explaining that this decision was based on how frequently those images were received. Quoting Janiya from the group:

> at the end of grade 12, as a grad gift, I'm making a scrapbook and the cover's gonna be a collage of all the dick pics we got in the last three years, and we did it, this beautiful, bound collaged dick pics collection. So, it becomes a funny thing, I found no one takes it seriously. [see laso Ricciardelli and Adrojan 2019:571]

The third author recalls Janiya's scrapbook experience,

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> which I also witnessed being in high school when doing the interviews. Rapport must be built independent of or related to participants' lived experience, and my role is to make the participant whole or as close to whole—to feel fulfilled and safe as themselves—as they can be in that moment in their life.
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The willingness to disclose this experience indicated a sense of safety and comfort in talking about harm and its impacts. The second author, who conducted the focus group, recalls his initial hesitation in asking about sexting in this group. This was ultimately minimized after the group's collective laughter and generally boisterous reaction to Janiya's plan. Over time, the second author contextualized the laughter and general jovial tone in a wider sociological frame—one where the group's response arguably indicates muted agency and resistance in the face of much wider gendered double standards and norms (see Ricciardelli and Adorjan 2019). The third author's reflections on asking questions about IBSA put forth further considerations when interviewing youth about vulnerability and harm:

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> Certain conversations tend to resonate. I recall a female gay youth who had intimate photos of her circulate, speak how time heals, and people lose interest (first because of time and second, in her view, because she came out as gay). I recall a younger Indigenous youth speak to the challenge of receiving intimate pictures from someone she was not dating and the challenges those pictures caused in her current relationship. I recall another youth in their early teens telling me about when she throws her phone in shock over when she unexpectedly opened the intimate image a boy she "barely knew" sent. Thus, there were situations described where youth were made vulnerable through images (and sexual messages) received. But there were also ways that youth recipients of these images and messages could make their senders vulnerable. For example, being put off by the image received, sharing the image even if it was sent in confidence, and other ways in which the receiver treats the sender or the image.
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Elaborating on the process of generating rapport and comfort and making participants feel "whole," the third author reflects:

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> Perhaps the element of interviewing that is most necessary to making an interviewee feel whole in a safe and healthy space is to validate how a person expresses what they feel. In interviewing, then, I try to never use leading questions, such as "Did that make you feel

> sad?" or probe or respond with statements suggesting impacts or views like "You must have been angry," because I cannot assume I know how someone else interprets an event. Validating a person is making one feel whole, no matter what course of action they selected or how they felt—recognizing and not judging or imposing society's expectations about appropriate actions/thoughts. Thus, I validate through language such as "what you felt is real" or "you are allowed to feel that way," while refraining from advice-giving, encouraging, sanctioning, or teaching morals, values, and ethics, or sharing a personal position. I do share scientific knowledge and academic findings or policy information, but never my beliefs, and I always try to minimize any reaction.
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The third author's reflections here indicate how deeply personal conducting qualitative interviews can be. In such a dynamic, researchers often find themselves needing to ask about the extent to which we should, or even can, refrain from "being ourselves" in the research process. What participants tell us often resonates with our own experiences, emotions, and memories as researchers. The direction of the questions, and probes, we ask must be approached with care and sensitivity. As Robinson (2023:393) notes, "to ensure that sensitivity is maximized during a semi-structured interview, the direction and intensity of probing should be informed by a general understanding of the cultural norms of the participant group." The first author further reflects on rapport, assumptions, and emotions below, emphasizing how these may inhibit how we might best engage with our participants:

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> I had several very positive experiences that highlighted to me the gifts of qualitative work. One particularly memorable experience I had was with a participant who noted that our interaction allowed him to see me as somewhat of a father figure. This youth had lost his father and had struggled navigating his choices in pursuing education again. It emphasized that these interactions can be both informative and deeply meaningful for participant and researcher alike. Paradoxically, one of the things it made me contemplate further is whether the way we are trained as qualitative researchers needs adapting to better center these possibilities. At the moment, it seems as though we are confined to a strictly regulated space that impresses upon us the importance of maintaining rigid boundaries, distance from the participant, and ensuring we protect our participants' emotional well-being at all costs. In my view, this should be expanded to encapsulate the reality that sometimes conversations trigger difficult emotions, and it's very medicalizing to view that emotionality as a warning sign. Emotionality, even if it is "difficult," and even if it is tied up with challenging experiences, is not inherently bad nor in need of solving, fixing, or alleviating. Sometimes, we as the researchers, in my view, need to simply make space for those feelings to be safely felt, expressed, and then, if appropriate, for the topic to be tactfully brought back into focus.
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Interview questions, which should be open-ended although can vary in structure, tend to be formally approached, akin to being in detective mode, as opposed to regular, less formal conversations (Price 2002:273). The first author recalls conducting an interview with a youth who had a great deal of difficulty openly responding to the questions. "I attempted to mediate this," he reflects, "by incorporating a more standard conversation into the interviewing process as a means of building rapport and inviting the participant to share more openly."

Reticence and silence are not inherently negative or anti-social. The first author elaborates:

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> Something I think we often forget is that participants, especially youth participants, may not always have an answer to a particular question and may not always let us know that through a clear and direct statement of the fact. As researchers, we are often assuming the issue is an absence of willingness to share versus a genuine lack of response to a certain topic.
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Price (2002) notes how nonverbal forms of communication, and their interpretation, are sources of knowledge for the researcher who can use such to help guide decision-making processes throughout the interaction. Nonverbal communication can reveal where the researcher should proceed in the interview, which questions to choose, how each question is communicated, et cetera. To appreciate nonverbal communication, the interviewer must learn to read body language. Price (2002:276) "spent some time learning how to read the body language of [the] respondent, quickly." The need for rapid adjustments syncs with our notion of developing "fast trust" and rapport during the interview. Price (2002:278) adds "evaluation of body language and verbal responses…serve to explain judgments of whether to probe more or less."

All this can be, of course, emotionally draining for the researcher (setting aside the very real emotional labor involved for participants alike). Ensign (2003:48) reminds us of "the very real danger of qualitative researchers getting emotionally drained and overwhelmed by the difficult lives and circumstances in which many research participants are found." Training ourselves to be mindful practitioners takes time and resources. However, a focus on the researcher as isolated from their wider research environment and community aligns with more neoliberal notions of responsibility. The emotional labor and ethical dilemmas of researchers should not be a carefully guarded secret, nor something conceived as a personal trouble. C. Wright Mills (1959) influentially drew connections between individuals' personal troubles to wider, collectively experienced public issues. The ethical concerns and experiences expressed in this article are not unique nor isolated incidents—they are shared with others, especially those learning the craft of conducting qualitative research. We need, in other words, an ethical and sociological imagination regarding experiences in the field of conducting qualitative research, including experiences with emotional labor (see Adorjan 2016).

Discussion and Conclusion

We must, as researchers, always center the experiences of qualitative researchers in their pursuit of better approaches to the ethical conundrums commonplace in research today. Any qualitative research is emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), and rapport and trust problems are far from new, which is why we conceptualize fast trust (Haynes 2020). This speaks to the vast confidentiality and disclosure arising from interview processes in shared spaces fostered carefully at a point in time but lacking in duration and often never again to be repeated. The interview process can be grueling and rewarding, some suggest like "therapy," although interviews are never such, they are devoid of "homework" and are always supportive of the interviewee, no matter what is reported. Nevertheless, this very fact can affect the researchers' health (Dempsey et al. 2016), creating challenges when reflecting and leaving an imprint of all heard and learned.

Sociology and related fields have enthusiastically debated the issue of youth in research, particularly in relation to ideas about agency, positionality, voice, and power, as well as their ostensible inaccessibility or the notion of youth as "unwilling participants." These ideas—or rather, the "problems" that arise within them—are well-established in the literature, yet tangible solutions to them are often few-and-far-between. Within this article, we have set about the task of envisioning potential paths through some of the messiness that is often attached to participation and organizational collaborations in qualitative research with youth in Canada.

Part of the challenge of establishing a clear set of solutions to the problems we outlined, then, lies with our tendency to either infantilize youth and strip them of agency, unconsciously or consciously, or to overlook age with a view of trying "not to treat young people differently just because of their age" (Brooks 2012:183), or even to make assumptions about their interest in participating or willingness to be called upon for such. However, the debate requires greater nuance, for it is not always appropriate to overlook age either. We acknowledge how in erasing the consideration of age we may also jeopardize our ability to reasonably adjust many of the essential components of our praxis in the field, from our tone to our language choices, all of which, as we have argued, play a foundational role in transmitting impressions from researcher to participant. Also possible is that in limiting our consideration of age, we may unconsciously pivot *away* from the experiences that youths find themselves navigating, many of which are often unique to this specific social location.

A significant proportion of the qualitative researcher's craft lies with our freedom to pivot and to respond dynamically to the plethora of potential problems, or joys, that can arise at any moment during the research process. Some of these moments require shifts in response to the possible ways social demographic factors, like age, may be contributing to such occurrences in the process. Moreover, as the literature discusses, researchers have a responsibility to the community and must be reflexive yet open-minded about a full range of experiences and contexts in which youth (or adults) find themselves within (e.g., Lassiter 2005), often including in relation to age. How to be reflective and to enact our responsibility to the community is often neither discussed nor, unfortunately, expected (Lassiter 2005). Perhaps a way would be knowledge mobilization with a focus on ensuring practices respect age, yet the need to return information learned to participating youth or their overseers is rarely considered in the social sciences nor ensured, regulated, monitored, or enacted, with any sort of accountability on the part of researchers. One way to reveal "how" appears to be sharing or having shared experiences in the field, which we seek to do in the current article. Here, we strive to highlight "the types of difficulties that are so often left out of the polished, final accounts of research studies that we read and hear" (Duncan et al. 2009:1692). Moreover, we recognize where we have fallen short, creating reports based on our studies, where we could have also created information bundles, infographics, and other processes directed to the youth studied too. Positively, however, using a capacity to consent approach did move toward an effective relational ethics (Meloni et al. 2015), as youth can often understand and consent to sociological research, which provides agency, voice, and empowerment. Yet, what about how to identify when there is an *incapacity* to consent? Another area worthy of inquiry, beyond determinations of capacity, concerns how to equitably assess youth capacity to consent, including those who do not demonstrate it, without causing harm or interpretations of inequity.

Nevertheless, in this article, we responded positively and took to heart in reflecting on our research designs and processes to the TCPS2's acknowledgement that age should not be the ultimate metric for assessing capacity to consent. While "ethics committees can assume an important role in checking that basic ethical principles have been considered" (Brooks 2012:181 quoting Bessant et al. 2012), we must also grapple with the reality of the impossibility for any board to fully account for the complete range of possibilities that come with any research project. Typically, research ethics boards and official guidelines are seen as the standard by which we must carve out our approaches to our fieldwork. And yet, to what extent has ethics simply become a hurdle for each researcher to clear? And what do they have the right to comment on beyond ethical processes? Can an ethics board in good faith request a copy of a research contract with an organization? Impose their interpretations? And what does it mean when the voices of youth are being further reduced by an ethics board that believes they "know best," despite expertise in the space or subject area?

With each review, we are often engaging in thought games about how we phrase something, what boxes we need to tick, and how we can get approval as quickly as possible to enable us to move forward with the work that has excited us for months, sometimes years, up to that point. In weaving a series of reflections and experiences from the field, we have laid the foundations for a renewed engagement that can provide possibilities beyond the rigidity of ethics board protocols.

To this end, we take to heart Duncan and colleagues' (2009:1692) idea of ethical mindfulness, which "involves the recognition of ethically important moments, giving credence to the feeling of being 'uncomfortable' about an event, being able to articulate what makes something an ethical matter, being reflexive and having courage." And we flip the idea too—when can others harm our own ethical mindfulness, and does an ethics board do so at times? The contribution here is to try to recognize, if possible, unconscious bias that, ironically, can undermine our ethical mindfulness, but how to ensure the biases of ethics boards do not hamper the researcher's own ethical mindfulness? These are areas requiring more research and understanding moving forward. Simply said, when you remove the voice of an already voiceless person, you make them even more vulnerable—this includes youth.

Our aim here has been to help inspire further conversations about such experiences and help researchers, especially junior scholars, not feel isolated in the challenges, and joys, experienced in the field.

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