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# Developing Co-Research Techniques for Effective Work with Underserved and Underrepresented Teens

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**Abstract**

The practice of including youth as co-researchers in study designs is increasingly advocated for by scholars invested in recognizing young people as agential, capable individuals. While this idea is appealing in many ways, and shares spirit with a variety of continually evolving participatory research and design approaches, the practicalities of this kind of work can require shifts in how we conceptualize, design, conduct, analyze, share, and evaluate research. Here, we describe our current work conducting co-research with teens, and reflect on the conceptual and practical challenges and opportunities that arise from this approach.

**Author Keywords**

teens; teenagers; adolescents; co-research; research design.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

K.4.0. Computers and Society. General.

**Introduction**

Researchers from a variety of fields have expressed enthusiasm for co-research with youth as a way to combat paternalistic attitudes that can influence more

traditional research [4], as a way to help mitigate the power differentials inherent in adults studying youth [1], and as a way to bring community based and relevant perspectives to bear on scholarship [1, 2]. Dresang argues that “closer collaboration with youth themselves as partners in constructing research (rather than as objects of it)” is an opportunity that shifts “from investigations that assume adults will study children to one in which adults and children learn from each other” [3, p. 1123]. While we are excited by the possibilities of this style of research, we are also discovering the practical intricacies involved in carrying it out, and recognize that our approach to this kind of scholarship will be iteratively developed.

### **Our Current Process**

We are building an approach to co-research with youth by iteratively developing our methods with teens from differing backgrounds in various geographical locations. We are introducing them to social science and the research process using a camp style model, and developing, running, and analyzing different studies together at each site. We refer to these teens as “Young Researchers.” Our first site is in a low population density area, and technological access varies widely among the teens who are participating as co-researchers, several of whom do not own phones and have limited access to the internet. We are working with seven young adults between the ages of 14 – 18. We have met with them at a local community college (approximately two hours from our home location) for what will be a total of three 5-hour day camps.

At the time of this writing, during our first two sessions, we have delved into research ethics and the research design process, and have co-developed a survey that

the Young Researchers are currently conducting with their peers. Because of the level of their intellectual contribution, the teens are considered researchers as well as participants by the University. They are engaged in the full process, including study and instrument design, recruiting, and analysis and reporting of findings in our next stage. They will also have the opportunity to present findings at our university and to act as co-authors of future publications and presentations.

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

In this work, as with many of the other studies we have conducted with youth, logistics are complex. Travel is a factor in reaching this population, and parental consent and involvement is required for our Young Researchers. This is a practical concern for many who cannot yet drive and rely on parents for getting to the camps. The teens are engaged and collegial, and a different group of youth may have different levels of success. Additionally, we are educating as we are analyzing, and this kind of research takes a significant investment of time. We find that it is ultimately impacting the pace of our scholarship, a significant consideration.

We have seen so far that our study design is different than we might have imagined because of the influence of the Young Researchers. For example, they advocated strongly for paper versions of our survey, which we were able to coordinate but for which we did not anticipate a need. They are interested in how their peers perceive social media use, and are asking deep questions that get at values and social norms, such as “how often do you use social media and/or entertainment when you're also interacting with people face-to-face?” We will be conducting analysis on the

current co-designed study in Jan. 2017, which will lead to a better understanding of how youth co-researchers contribute to these analytical stages of research.

### **Considerations and Applications for Future Work**

The co-research process is a way to bring in voices of individuals and communities not usually represented in research and scholarship. We believe this is highly appropriate for work with underserved and underrepresented populations, but recognize that this work is contextual and sensitive. We are currently engaging with youth from a geographically dispersed area, and are planning to work with first generation youth in the future, as well as youth with other identities and communities. As we conduct multiple iterations of this approach, we will consider the techniques and processes that can be relevant or informative for work across populations, while also engaging with the importance of context and local community.

In addition to our co-analyzed research, which we anticipate will focus on everyday life technology use and social media, we will continue to refine our co-research approach. One of the concerns we have, particularly as we think about scalability of this kind of work, is how to support researchers who are interested in working with youth to inform their scholarship, but do not have the same level of experience as our research team in youth development and designing programs and curricula for this kind of group.

To that end, in addition to publishing on our techniques, we also plan to design processes and materials that will be made publicly available with

specific audiences in mind – teens and parents, educators and libraries, and scientists and researchers. These materials will be designed using participatory methods that address the needs of these audiences.

### **Conclusion**

Though this work is currently in development, we believe this approach is well-aligned to prioritize youth voices and recognize the needs and priorities of underrepresented and underserved populations. We see promising evidence of co-research with teens yielding unique study designs and instruments, and are carefully planning ways to build this approach in consideration of scale, type of research, and kinds of participants.

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