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Ethical implications of power dynamics in the recruitment of young people in school settings

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It is well-established that researchers must pay attention to potential power dynamics when recruiting subjects for research: university professors recruiting their own students, bosses disseminating surveys to their employees, doctors soliciting participation in a medical study from their own patients, etc. At the same time, youth are considered a vulnerable population for research purposes, and as such, research including young participants generally undergoes additional scrutiny in the ethical review process [1]. When research involves both potential power dynamics and includes youth, which is frequently the case because multiple gatekeepers are involved in providing consent – schools, teachers, counsellors, and/or parents – the situation becomes even more complex. Previous research has shown that researchers working with youth frequently have to make a series of ethical compromises in order to fulfil the requirements of the many gatekeepers involved in research with youth [2] [3]. This paper highlights two main ethical implications of power dynamics when using young people as research participants: a) considerations of (in) competence of young people in providing free and informed consent, including the implications of enforcing a standard legal age of consent; and b) power dynamics during recruitment (e.g. involvement of parents, teachers, counsellors; and peer pressure) and the effect of these power dynamics not only on youth's ability to provide informed consent, but also on the results of the research study. When examining these considerations, I focus on the age group of 14-20, as countries and institutions/ethics boards differ in their considerations of age required to give consent (without parental approval) for participation in particular kinds of research, generally requiring parental consent forms for ages up to 16, but providing different definitions of when youth are considered legally competent to give their own independent consent. I reflect on the literature from social psychology and sociology on the effects of power dynamics on youth's decision-making, questioning the established practice of using age-cut-offs for informed consent, and instead advocating for a more holistic understanding of the potential effects of power dynamics on the ethical nature of the research.

[1] Schmid, E., & Garrels, V. (2025). Ethical Pitfalls in Research with Young People: How Can They Be Identified and Addressed?. *Sage Open*, 33(1), 56-71.

[2] Lenton, L. A., Smith, V., Bacon, A. M., May, J., & Charlesford, J. (2021). Ethical considerations for committees, supervisors and student researchers conducting qualitative research with young people in the United Kingdom. *Methods in Psychology*, 5.

[3] Singh, S., & Wassenaar, D. R. (2016). Contextualising the role of the gatekeeper in social science research. *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law*, 9(1), 42-46.