

Do a lot of work for charity

MANY psychology students do volunteer work of some kind, but less common is conducting research projects with charities. This surprises me, given that it is a win-win situation: the charity benefits from having relevant research conducted at low cost, and students obtain participants for their projects, plus experience of accomplishing research in a real-world setting.

The first step when doing research for or with a charity is to identify gaps and current research needs. This can follow a literature review of your own, but meeting with staff from the charity is essential. Engage the 'consumers' of your project to help define the research questions. Pay attention to where the demand lies and ask staff what they want to know. Once your proposal is written, submit a research protocol to your ethics committee. As you carry out your study, meet with staff periodically to review progress.

BY GARETH HAGGER-JOHNSON

The greatest challenge is communicating and disseminating the findings; ineffective communication by researchers of their work is common in many disciplines



(Willems, 2003). This could take the form of a presentation, a report or an article for a newsletter. Construct results in a way that is comprehensible and non-technical. Tailor the presentation to the audience, and if you make policy recommendations, ensure

these are clear. You may not have clear and unambiguous conclusions, but staff will most likely require a 'take-home message' or summary.

A cautionary note – bear in

mind that some policy makers in charities do not view research as central to decision making. What counts as useful, interesting or relevant knowledge varies as a function of wider political, cultural and economic forces. The validity and credibility of your findings may be contested and should not be taken for granted. Existing 'policy paradigms', tradition and routine may involve substantial and costly investment and resistance to change.

Despite the challenges, building bridges between academic departments, student research and charities is of high value. At the University of Edinburgh, a scheme called 'Action Connection' was established to liaise with charities and match their research needs to senior honours and postgraduate student projects (see www.sett.ed.ac.uk/clink). Examples of work that students have recently completed or are presently carrying out include work with an ethnic dance-based arts organisation, with

a drop-in facility for those with mental health problems, developing youth provision in a mixed housing inner city area, and studying pollution in the Water of Leith.

Action Connection currently holds requests from over 60 voluntary and third-sector organisations, who need studies, surveys and other types of research undertaken to help develop new initiatives or evidence the effectiveness of their current provision.

Communicating findings to this wider community is definitely a rewarding experience: explaining and improving the world need not be disconnected.

■ *Gareth Hagger-Johnson is a postgraduate student at the University of Edinburgh.*

Reference

Willems, J. (2003). Bringing down the barriers: Public communication should be part of common scientific practice. *Nature*, 422, 470.

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