

Sexual Solicitation of Adolescents and Milgram Revisited

After reading this chapter, you may think that the ethical dilemmas from the past have been remedied by the new regulations and oversights. However, research organizations and IRBs around the world have to make decisions every day about whether the benefits of research outweigh the risks imposed to human subjects. For researchers interested in examining criminal, deviant, or otherwise hidden subcultures, obtaining informed consent is often a dubious enterprise. In addition, the growth of the Internet has provided new frontiers for observing and engaging in online communications in such forums as blogs and online chatrooms. In fact, David Calvey has described the cyber world as “a covert playground, where social researchers typically ‘lurk’ in order to explore this area” (Calvey, 2014, p. 546). This research has generated renewed debate about informed consent and deception. Of course, some researchers contend that covert research that does not obtain voluntary consent is necessary and justified because the information would otherwise be closed to research and/or because alerting participants that they are being studied would change their behavior or put researchers at risk (Pearson, 2009). A few contemporary case studies will illuminate these ethical dilemmas well.

The first research example comes from studies examining chatrooms and pedophilia. Research indicates that sexual or romantic relationships between adults and adolescents sometimes are initiated in Internet chat rooms. In fact, reality television shows like *To Catch a Predator* impersonated underage people to solicit male adults over the Internet. Of course, many police organizations (including the FBI) utilize such methods and investigative journalists (like those who developed *To Catch a Predator*) do not have to go through an IRB for permission. But what about researchers who do? To more fully understand these chatroom solicitations, Emilia Bergen and her colleagues (2013) examined how adult male chat room visitors reacted to children and adolescents (they were adults posing as children) in three chat rooms. They wanted to determine whether the age of the child affected whether the adults continued to engage in sexual conversation or pursued a meeting after finding out the ages of the impersonated children. The impersonators pretended to be either 10, 12, 14, 16, or 18 years of age. The researchers hypothesized that the older the impersonated child was, the more likely it was that adult males would express sexual interest and suggest meeting offline. All chatrooms were free and did not require registration, and one had a homosexual orientation while the other two were heterosexual in nature. Results indicated that the adult males were more likely to engage in sexual conversation and that face-to-face meetings were more likely suggested for impersonators who were 16 or older. Moreover, about almost half of the adult males (46%) stopped the conversation after they learned that the impersonator was 10 or 12. However, quite disturbingly, 1 in 5 adults still expressed continuing a sexual conversation even when impersonators divulged their age to be under 13. This research confirmed previous research findings that sexual predators are more likely to solicit older adolescents; however, it revealed that there is a nontrivial percentage of predators who are not deterred from soliciting children as young as 10 years of age.

Was this knowledge worth the lack of informed consent and deception in the research? Bergen and her colleagues (2013) were aware of the ethical dilemmas but concluded that

the value of the results from the present study would be higher than the possible harm. . . . Also, it should be noted, that we had no means (nor any interest in) gaining any information that could lead to a positive