
Chapter XI

Peering into Online Bedroom Windows: Considering the Ethical Implications of Investigating Internet Relationships and Sexuality

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ABSTRACT

To date, there is a scarcity of literature available on the ethical concerns that accompany research into online relationships and sexuality. This chapter attempts to redress this balance. Questions are raised as to whether researchers should be permitted to lurk in chatrooms or take on different identities in order to obtain data. It is argued here that conceptions of cyberspace as one generic space is a narrow construction and that instead researchers need to consider the fuzzy boundaries between what constitutes a public and a private space online. How we perceive this space has important implications for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The focus on Internet relationships has escalated in recent times, with researchers investigating such areas as the development of online relationships (Whitty & Gavin, 2001, Whitty, 2003), the formation of friends online (Parks & Floyd, 1996) and misrepresentation online (Whitty, 2002a). The accessibility of online lascivious material has also been a popular area to study. For example, researchers have examined what types of individuals peruse the Web for erotic material, with an attempt to identify those addicted to accessing Internet erotic material (Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, & Boies, 1999). Moreover, others have been interested in Internet infidelity (Whitty, 2002b) and cybersex addiction (Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 2000). Notwithstanding this continued growth of research in this field, researchers have neglected to stop and consider how one might best conduct research of this kind in an ethical manner. While many of the ethical issues raised in this chapter can be (and sometimes are) applied to online research in general, the focus here is on the concomitant ethical concerns of ongoing research into Internet relationships and sexuality. Given that the development and maintenance of online relationships, and the engaging in online sexual activities can be perceived as private and very personal, there are potentially ethical concerns that are unique to the study of such a topic area.

This chapter provides a brief background on the research conducted to date on Internet relationships and sexuality. It then proceeds to outline the benefits of studying this area and the advantages in recruiting participants online. Ethical concerns in respect to the types of methods social scientists employ to collect data online are discussed. For example, it is questioned whether lurking or deceptive strategies to collect data are ethical or even necessary, especially in respect to the study of online relationships and sexuality. The argument proposed here is that there are fuzzy boundaries between what constitutes a public and private space online and that when we debate concerns on virtual ethics we need to consider this ambiguity. Finally, this chapter considers practical concerns, such as informed consent, withdrawal of consent, confidentiality, psychological safeguards and cross-cultural differences.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON INTERNET RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY

Let me begin this chapter by providing an adumbration of research that has been conducted to date on Internet relationships and sexuality, while recognizing an exhaustive review of the literature is beyond the scope of this chapter. Early research into this area has mostly focused on the similarities and differences between online and offline relationships. Researchers have been divided over the importance of available social cues in the creation and maintenance of online relationships. Some have argued that online relationships are shallow and impersonal (e.g., Slouka, 1995). In contrast, others contend that Internet relationships are just as emotionally fulfilling as face-to-face relationships, and that any lack of social cues can be overcome. With time, they suggest, the reported differences between online and offline relating dissipates (Lea & Spears, 1995; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Walther, 1996). In addition, researchers have purported that

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