



Ethical Issues in Surveys about Children's Exposure to Violence and Sexual Abuse

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This book chapter explores some of the major ethical issues that arise when conducting research with children and youth victimization and sexual abuse. It focuses largely on issues involved in conducting population-based and community surveys designed to obtain prevalence rates of, risk factors for, and impact of childhood victimization. The authors consider a wide range of issues, including minimizing the potential distress of youth participants; obtaining informed consent; and working with research ethics boards.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The authors of this book chapter discuss major ethical issues in youth research concerning victimization and sexual abuse, organizing their discussion in four major sections: 1) protecting children from harm, 2) obtaining informed consent, 3) miscellaneous methodological issues and 4) research agenda. They identify gaps in current research on ethics in this area, and suggest some methods to improve upon these knowledge gaps.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

- Researchers studying youth victimization and sexual abuse need to consider and balance multiple ethical principles, such as minimizing harm that might arise from participating, obtaining informed consent, protecting confidentiality, and maximizing the benefits to participants and to the research field.
- There is a significant need for additional research to inform ethical practices in this field.
- In the absence of clear-cut evidence about the superiority of one practice over another, there may be benefits from encouraging researchers to take an experimental approach to some of these practices.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

The researchers summarized a variety of complex ethical concerns that arise in work on youth victimization and sexual abuse. For example, they consider issues related to confidentiality, consent, compensation, and cultural sensitivity. The authors make some suggestions for good practices, but broadly conclude there is currently a lack of clear-cut evidence-based best practices.

There is a significant need for additional research to inform ethical practices in studies concerning victimization and sexual abuse in children. The authors suggest that the field would benefit from more flexibility on the part of researchers and ethics boards, in order to establish optimal practices. Researchers (and ethics boards) could advance the field by taking an experimental approach to some of these practices (e.g., if there is disagreement on how explicit the wording of a content description of a survey should be, then the researcher should be encouraged to use two versions of the content description; one more explicit and one less explicit, and test for differences in participation rate and satisfaction).

Another technique for developing knowledge about ethical issues is the use of “cognitive interviewing” in advance of full study implementation. Cognitive interviewing involves having participants complete a study protocol (e.g., a questionnaire), and reviewing it with them for their specific reactions to certain statements, questions, or procedures. Such work could enhance knowledge in the field about the effects of varying ethical practices.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Researchers can use this chapter to guide their study designs. The chapter raises questions that can help researchers thoughtfully consider ways to minimize harm and maximize benefits in their work, while also expanding available knowledge in the field about effective ethical procedures.

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