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Exploring the Science of Conducting Surveys for Studying Men's Sexual Assault Perpetration Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Focus groups were used to explore the most appropriate ways to conduct survey research about men's relationships with women and their sexual assault behaviors that result in high response rates and decrease socially desirable answers. A racially diverse group of 24 English-speaking heterosexual men, aged 18 years or older, were recruited for participation in 3 focus groups. The men were asked to review a survey instrument used in a previous study and the results from that study. Analysis of the focus group transcripts indicates that the men responded to the survey instrument from 3 distinct perspectives: (a) perpetrators, (b) victims, and (c) respondents. From these perspectives, the men also commented on participant anonymity, survey construction and delivery method, question wording, and potential pitfalls in asking men about sexual assault.

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Knowledge about sexual assault is mostly derived from two sources—victims who are willing to report or discuss their experiences and offenders who have been apprehended (Abbey, Parkhill, BeShears, Clinton-Sherrod, & Zawacki, 2006; Lisak & Miller, 2002; Miccio-Fonseca & Rasmussen, 2009; Senn, Verberg, Desmarais, & Wood, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Knowledge from both sources is vital to understanding sexual assault and improving intervention and prevention programs. Sexual assault researchers point out that question wording and research methods influence sexual assault identification (Kolivas & Gross, 2007; Koss, 1993; Koss et al., 2007). Fisher, Cullen, and Daigle (2005) also highlighted drawbacks in studying victimization, especially with the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Some of the major flaws were the inclusion of only those rapes that victims reported to the police and exclusion of sexual assault cases that fell outside the stereotype of the "real" rape.

Researchers are examining the ways sexual assault is studied to determine how to increase the validity and reliability of sexual assault report data (see

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Cook, 2002; DiNitto et al., 2008, for examples). For example, more information is needed about the larger group of men in the United States who perpetrate sexual assault but are not arrested (Busch-Armendariz, Bell, DiNitto, Vohra-Gupta, & Rhodes, 2011) or prosecuted (Lisak & Miller, 2002). A study of a nationally representative sample of men would be particularly useful to better understand sexual assault perpetration for purposes of prevention, intervention, and developing public policy. To that end, DiNitto et al. (2008) conducted three pilot studies to obtain information on sexual perpetration from adult men using both telephone and Web survey methodology. Despite the low response rates in all the pilot studies, the telephone survey achieved a higher response rate and produced a wider range of responses to sexual assault behaviors, indicating higher respondent engagement on the phone. These authors also acknowledged that additional work is needed to refine conceptual frameworks, improve instrumentation, and test methods of administration and data collection that boost response rates. This article describes the findings from focus groups conducted with men about their perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of using survey methodology to ask a community sample of men about a range of sexually assaultive behaviors they might have perpetrated, including their critiques about survey questions, format for the survey questions, and survey administration. The article concludes with a discussion of the research implications for future sexual assault studies.

Literature review

Most men do not commit sexual assault; however, research indicates that most sexual perpetrators are men and that most are never held responsible for their actions, perhaps because most know or are related to their victims (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2011; Gidycz, Warkentin, Orchowski, & Edwards, 2011; Lisak & Miller, 2002). Other than studies of convicted rapists (a small percentage of men committing sexual assault; Koss, 2000) and college students' behaviors and perspectives (Abbey & McAuslan, 2004; Thompson & Cracco, 2008), studies about men who commit sexual assault are limited and the topic is underresearched (Jewkes, Fulu, Roselli, & Garcia-Moreno, 2013). Refined survey instruments, coupled with a high response rate, would greatly improve knowledge about the larger group of men who engage in some form of sexually assaultive behavior.

Prior studies and commentary about conducting sexual assault research stress that validity and reliability can be difficult to achieve in surveys about sensitive subjects due to the stigma associated with disclosure, challenges of wording survey items, respondents' concerns about confidentiality and anonymity, and the need to ensure nonjudgmental perspectives (DiNitto et al., 2008; Rosenbaum & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2006). Cook's (2002) study of a

randomly selected sample of 160 incarcerated men investigated self-reports of sexual, physical, and nonphysical abuse perpetration obtained using three measurement instruments: the Sexual Experiences Scale (SES), Conflict Tactics Scale–Revised (CTS2), and Severity of Violence Against Women Scales (SVAWS). The instruments were used to explicate how issues such as measurement choices and methodological, sociodemographic, or motivational factors might influence the degree, validity, and reliability of disclosure. Cook (2002) found that the percentage of men who reported sexual aggression, but not [other] physical or nonphysical aggression, varied according to the instrument. Because the instruments used differed on many dimensions, she was unable to identify which parts of the instruments' operational definitions promoted disclosure (Cook, 2002). Nonetheless, the results did not indicate a straightforward relationship between perpetration definition and disclosure. In addition, broader items produced higher positive response rates for minor sexual coercion; in other cases, specific items produced higher positive response rates for rape perpetration. Therefore, it is necessary to word items in ways that capture study participants' significant experiences. For example, Cook (2002) suggested that using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods best elicits participants' experiences.

According to Kolivas and Gross (2007), survey instruments used to identify women's sexual assault victimization experiences have often been adapted for use in studying men's sexually aggressive behavior with only minor wording changes. These study items are framed from females' rather than the males' viewpoint and are biased toward eliciting information from female victims rather than from men who might have engaged in sexually aggressive behaviors. Therefore, inconsistencies in victimization–perpetration reporting rates among men and women might not be surprising. From the late 1970s to the 1990s, Lisak and colleagues developed a body of research on convicted and "undetected rapists," and concluded that these men share common characteristics such as anger toward women and lack of empathy (Lisak & Miller, 2002). This research is now somewhat dated, and given the continued high prevalence of sexual assault, there is a need to further explore variables such as attitudes about gender, culture, and socialization (including the use of language, other sociocultural factors, and structural factors) that could influence men's perspectives of sexual experiences and sexual assault behaviors toward women. This knowledge might help to prevent sexual assault, as well as minimize respondent biases and increase disclosure rates in studying sexual assault perpetration. For example, Marx and Gross (1995) asked 100 college males to listen to an audiotape of a sexual interaction between a male and female college student and gave them different types of information about the couple's history with each other. Authors found that men had difficulty distinguishing when a woman's refusal was genuine, especially among those who perceived women's refusals

as an indication of intimacy. This study suggests that men might misconstrue their own level of sexually coercive and aggressive behavior, which culd further fortify their aggressiveness toward women.

Studies exploring class differences of men in relation to their responses to sexual aggression are rare and few have tried to understand the profundity of these differences, including ethnic and racial differences (Hamby & Koss, 2003). Hamby and Koss (2003) conducted five focus groups with ethnically and geographically diverse women and men to investigate how item wording affects reporting of negative sexual experiences. A significant study outcome included participants' emphasis on the need for a comprehensive definition of coercion that explains the conventional definition of rape. The women and men in the study also described various social factors such as gender, class, and literacy issues that might contribute to variations in perceptions of coercion, and recommended using unambiguous descriptions of sexual acts in victimization surveys and more clearly defining the meaning of coercion.

Until recently, national studies have generally failed to utilize a well-operationalized definition of coercion that includes a range of sexual assault behaviors. Understanding differences in the meaning of words is critical in sexual victimization reports, and the implications of those differences for affecting reported rates of sexual assault underscore the need to use definitions that are both legally correct and culturally sensitive. According to Hamby and Koss (2003), the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) is one of the early measures that addressed the construct of coercion by asking respondents about different forms of coercion, including physical and nonphysical forms. Although their study participants (both men and women) were ethnically diverse, these authors were unable to recommend item wording specific to particular racial or ethnic groups, although they believed social class, literacy levels, and differences between generations affect sexual victimization assessment among women. More recently, the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey measured sexual violence broadly to include "expressive psychological aggression and coercive control" (Black et al., 2011, p. 1). Findings indicated that "13% of women and 6% of men have experienced sexual coercion in their lifetime (i.e., unwanted sexual penetration after being pressured in a nonphysical way)" (Black et al., 2011, p. 2).

Other studies have also used behaviorally specific questions to fully assess the range of sexual victimization (Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003; Koss et al., 2007; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). For example, Fisher et al. (2005) included 12 behaviorally specific questions in their survey developed for the National College Women Sexual Victimization Study. These questions provided "hints" to help respondents identify a wide range of sexual victimization, including attempted and completed rape. Respondents who identified such an experience were asked for a detailed incident report that identified

the experience of victimization and the type. This methodological approach included using a larger number of screening questions and an incident report to corroborate in detail the respondents' experiences. Further, the revised SES uses specific categories such as nonvictim, sexual contact, attempted coercion, coercion, attempted rape, and rape to reveal prevalence (Koss et al., 2007).

The purpose of this study was to identify ways to improve survey administration, question wording, subject recruitment, use of incentives, and other factors that could increase men's participation in a survey about sexual assault perpetration. The major research question for the study was this: What can we learn from men about improving survey research to obtain information from men about their sexually coercive or assaultive behaviors that will result in high response rates and decrease socially desirable answers?

Methods

Focus group methodology was selected to obtain responses from men of diverse backgrounds residing in the community. Given the subject's sensitivity, the authors assumed men might be more candid about discussing sexual assault perpetration with other men, including male focus group facilitators. A Latino man and a White man cofacilitated each focus group. Participants were not asked about their own behaviors; instead, they were asked to evaluate the survey instrument shown in Figure 1 and suggest ways to improve administration to encourage men's participation and elicit candid responses. A projective interviewing approach (Patton, 2002) was used to elicit participants' inner thoughts about the survey instrument, questions, and study design. Projective interviewing allows subjects to project their hidden feelings about others or a situation in an open discussion (Donoghue, 2000). It is participants' projections of their unconscious desires and feelings about a situation or outside stimuli that allow them to indirectly respond to other people's attitudes or other situations (Donoghue, 2000). In this case, the stimulus is a survey instrument and survey methodology that would be used to obtain information from men about their sexual assault perpetration experiences.

Participant recruitment procedures

A racially diverse group of 24 English-speaking heterosexual men, aged 18 years or older, from a large Southern urban city in the United States were recruited for participation in the focus groups. Participants were strangers who responded to the ad and chose to participate in the study.

Non-English speakers were excluded because of the complexity of conducting focus groups when translation is required. Nonheterosexual men

Behavior
1. Engaged in sex play (fondling, kissing, or petting, but not intercourse) with a woman when she didn't want to by overwhelming her with continual arguments and pressure.
**2. Engaged in sex play (fondling, kissing, or petting, but not intercourse) with a woman when she didn't want to by using your position of authority (boss, teacher, camp counselor, supervisor)?
*3. Engaged in sex play (fondling, kissing, or petting, but not intercourse) with a woman when she didn't want to by threatening or using some degree of physical force (twisting her arm, holding her down, grabbing, hitting, choking, pinching, or in any other way restraining her movement or physically hurting her)?
**4. Attempted sexual intercourse (got on top of her, attempted to insert penis) with a woman when she didn't want to by using your position of authority (boss, teacher, camp counselor, supervisor) but intercourse did not occur.
*5. Attempted sexual intercourse (got on top of her, attempted to insert penis) with a woman when she didn't want it by threatening or using some degree of physical force (twisting her arm, holding her down, grabbing, hitting, choking, pinching, or in any other way restraining her movement or physically hurting her) but intercourse did not occur?
*6. Attempted sexual intercourse (got on top of her, attempted to insert penis) with a woman when she didn't want it by giving her alcohol or drugs, but intercourse did not occur?
7. Engaged in sexual intercourse with a woman when she didn't want to by overwhelming her with continual arguments and pressure?
8. Engaged in sexual intercourse with a woman when she didn't want to by showing your displeasure (sulking, making her feel guilty, swearing, getting angry, threatening to end the relationship, etc.) until you got your way?
**9. Engaged in sexual intercourse with a woman when she didn't want to by using your position of authority (boss, supervisor, camp counselor, teacher)?
*10. Engaged in sexual intercourse with a woman when she didn't want to by threatening or using some degree of physical force (twisting her arm, holding her down, grabbing, hitting, choking, pinching, or in any other way restraining her movement or physically hurting her)?
*11. Engaged in sexual intercourse with a woman when she didn't want to by giving her alcohol or drugs?
12. Engaged in sex acts (oral or anal intercourse or penetration by objects other than the penis) with a woman when she didn't want to by overwhelming her with continual arguments and pressure?
13. Engaged in sex acts (oral or anal intercourse or penetration by objects other than the penis) with a woman when she didn't want to by showing your displeasure (sulking, making her feel guilty, swearing, getting angry, threatening to end the relationship, etc.) until you got your way?
*14. Engaged in sex acts (oral or anal intercourse or penetration by objects other than the penis) with a woman when she didn't want to by threatening or using some degree of physical force (twisting her arm, holding her down, grabbing, hitting, choking, pinching, or in any other way restraining her movement or physically hurting her)?
*15. Engaged in sex acts (oral or anal intercourse or penetration by objects other than the penis) with a woman when she didn't want to by giving her alcohol or drugs?
*16. Engaged in sexual intercourse with a woman when she was unable to give her consent, perhaps because she was drunk or taking drugs at the time, or because she was a heavy sleeper, or because she was unconscious for any reason?

Figure 1. Original survey questions provided to research participants. *Note*: *Likely meets legal definition of sexual assault. **Might meet legal definition if done in capacity as public servant. Adapted from the instrument developed by Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, and Buck (2001) based on work of Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987).

were excluded because the researchers' interest was on sexual assault that men perpetrate on women. Research team members posted notices about the study at recreational centers, places of worship, men's athletic clubs, and

In general, what do they think about the sexual assault perpetration questions on the survey? To specific? Too vague? Will they generate accurate responses? Why? Why not?
If we were to give this interview by phone, how could we best recruit men to participate and ensure that they complete the survey? Would it matter if you were talking to a woman or man interviewer in answering these questions? How so?
If we were to give the survey on the Web, how could we best recruit men to participate and ensure that they completed the survey?
How long is too long? We do we start to lose people's interest? How long could we keep a participant on the phone without them hanging up or on the Web before they stop?
What might make men less likely to complete the survey fully?
Do you think incentives are necessary? If so, what should the incentive be?
Do you believe the responses that we get to this survey will be honest? How can we better ensure the accuracy of responses?
If you were called, would you be willing to take this survey?

Figure 2. Focus group questions asked of study participants.

other venues in which men are likely to congregate. A recruitment announcement was also posted on Craigslist.com. The notices provided a contact number that allowed potential participants to request further information, to complete the initial screening for the focus group, and to enroll in a focus group. One of the cofacilitators screened each participant for age and other factors just listed, and then gave those who met the screening criteria details about the focus group locations.

Three focus groups of six to eight men each were held during a 1-month period. Participants were grouped according to various ethnic and racial communities. As a result, one group consisted primarily of African American men, another primarily of Latino and Hispanic men, and one primarily of White men. No separate group of Asian men or men of other ethnicities was conducted due to difficulties in recruiting them in sufficient numbers. When Asian men and those of other ethnicities responded to recruitment efforts, they were asked to choose the focus group in which they wished to participate. Each focus group was held in a local recreation center that is accessible via bus or car. The focus groups lasted 60 to 90 min. Food was provided. At the end of the focus groups, participants were given $25 cash in appreciation for their time and effort. The Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin approved this study. Written informed consent was obtained for each participant.

Participants were asked to review a survey instrument the researchers had used in a previous study (see Figure 1) and were then asked the questions included in Figure 2. All groups were audiotaped. The tapes were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were entered into ATLAS.ti for qualitative analysis.

Focus group analysis

The focus group data were analyzed by reading whole focus group transcripts to identify how the participants constructed an understanding of their

interaction with the survey instrument. After an initial reading, the transcripts were reread and the researchers coded the accounts for turns in the interaction. These turns represent moments in the interaction where either party—focus group leader or participants—characterize a situation or interaction and how the discussant makes sense of that situation. Next, these coded turns were examined for the ways that focus group members described potential interpretations of the survey questions and men's responses to such questions.

The research team then reflected on what focus group members stated were the ways a research subject would read the survey questions and the influences they described as shaping the reading of the survey questions. This reflection began the processes of identifying the experiences focus group members drew on to interpret survey questions and the "perspectives" produced by "interacting with" the survey instrument. Reflections on each coded turn were recorded using ATLAS.ti's memo feature. Next, attention was given to membership categorization; that is, the perspectives focus group members produced as they reviewed the questions included in the survey. Each possible perspective (e.g., perpetrator, respondent) that members indicated was coded, followed by an analysis of the perspectives implicitly described or alluded to in the transcripts. This included the descriptions and attributes focus group participants offered to understand the boundaries of the perspectives they used to categorize potential respondents.

The last level of analysis involved determining the various ways focus group members constructed an understanding of their interaction with the survey. Both obvious statements about interacting with the survey (as in "if I were taking this I would …") were coded, as well as more implicit explanations. To identify implicit understandings, turns in the conversation were identified in which the focus group members evaluated the context of completing the interview and expressed their views or judgments about the perspectives identified in the transcripts. This analytic procedure resulted in an in-depth understanding of how focus group members interacted with the survey instrument, the perspectives produced through this interaction, and their evaluations of these perspectives.

Results

An initial overview of the findings is presented before discussing them in more detail to provide an understanding of the dynamic interaction between a survey respondent and the survey instrument and how this interplay might affect survey administration and responses about sexual assault. The analysis of the transcripts indicated that focus group participants suggested that men will respond to the survey from three different perspectives: perpetrator, victim, and respondent. The perpetrator perspective is discussed first,

followed by the victim perspective, and then the respondent perspective. This section also presents focus group participants' suggestions for improving survey administration and survey methodology.

Perpetrator perspective

Focus group members used the term *perpetrator* in specific ways. Similar to general dictionary-type definitions of sexual assault perpetration, they considered perpetrators to be individuals who had committed an act that meets the definition of sexual assault. These acts fall under the legal and social scientific definition of sexually assaultive behaviors and cover a range of behaviors in terms of their physicality and threat to the victim (e.g., from verbally pressuring a woman to engage in sexual activity when she has indicated that she is not interested in sexual contact to using physical force to engage in sexual intercourse with a woman).

Prevalence of sexual assault behaviors

With regard to the perpetrator perspective, focus group participants believed that a majority of men have at one time or another engaged in acts that fall under the umbrella of sexual assault. The item mentioned next refers to Item 1 in Figure 1 and the percentage refers to results from a previous study by two of the authors of this study (DiNitto et al., 2008). The participants in this study responded to it in the following way:

Participant: Well look at the answer to number one [the first question on the survey instrument]: 22% of men said they use pressure. It's probably closer to, like …

Participant: 98

Participant: 95. Right. So, right there you're seeing a huge underreporting on the most common thing … However they [the researchers] did it the first time, they got some of the truth, but obviously nowhere the real truth.

Participant: It's gonna be perceived in a way that it's a subject[ive] thing, especially [item] number 1 [on the survey instrument]. Because, as far as—what is pressure? Because guys will, you know, I mean—pressure girls in ways that are (aren't?) physical but aren't violent or anything else. And maybe the girl isn't resisting, but just not in the mood that night, and you kind of coerce her. … You know, we'll go out to dinner tomorrow. Does that count as an answer "Yes" to number 1 if I'm offering her compensation?

Participant: Yes.

Participant: Because there's not much of a divide here between pressure—positive pressure, I guess you could say. Offering rewards or whatever.

Focus group participants recognized how difficult it is to get survey respondents to be truthful.

> Participant: I don't know how you would determine who's gonna be—how honest someone is gonna be with you unless you … start trying to reference them and ask people about their character. You can't do that. So, it's gonna be real hard to decide if, "Hey, how honest is he gonna be with me when I give him this survey?" If randomly, the way you're picking people out, it's gonna be real hard for you to know.

Underreporting due to context of the situation

Other participants also reflected on the subject of underreporting and how men in general could dismiss something like sexual assault when it comes to intimate partners due to context of the situation.

> Participant: Or slight guilt … I mean, say if you've been married for 30 years. I doubt that there are many men that probably haven't tried to pressure the woman a little bit into sex at some point or another when they weren't really in the mood for it. Most people wouldn't think of that … as sexual assault, though. Um … there's a big difference between that and, you know, getting some girl in the corner … but she's 17 and just not leaving her alone until she gives in.

Avoiding misrepresentation of behaviors

Focus group respondents also suggested that men who perpetrate sexual assault would lie about or at least misrepresent their behavior; therefore, researchers should continue to attempt to ask questions in a manner that specifically identifies assaultive behavior to limit the effects of respondent lying or misrepresentation.

> Participant: I think you're also going to—and I don't know how to correct this at all—it's just what struck me when I was reading it. Um … there will be people who answer this question, I think, who rationalize away the part with the woman not wanting to. I mean, especially if you get into alcohol and drugs. Well, yeah, she didn't want this at the beginning of the night, but [inaudible] back to the bar and I bought her all these drinks sure she was really [inaudible] as opposed to sloshed and not getting uptight. And I don't know how to write that … fudge room out of there, for people to rationalize that they didn't do this.

Research participants explained that whereas some will lie about their sexually assaultive behavior, others might mistakenly indicate that they did something they did not because of the way the questions are written or worded. A number of participants also suggested that presenting survey questions in a nonthreatening manner, including simply asking for

information about a potential situation or behavior, might allow respondents to answer honestly about what has happened in the past.

Participant: Is the purpose here to establish, like, prevalence, or is it just kind of get an idea about attitudes?
Facilitator: Prevalence and attitudes.
Participant: Because my thought was, looking at it, you're asking yes–no questions. And it seems like you could present this in a less threatening way by doing it in a Likert kind of fashion.
Participant: With [survey Item] 1, "It's never even occurred to me to engage in sex play with a woman by pressuring her"; 7, "I've done it"; and, 5, "Yeah, I've thought about it and but I've not done it," "Yeah, I've really been encouraged to do it." That way you can have people who have done this and are never gonna admit that, maybe have a less threatening option, saying, "Yeah, you know, I've thought about that, but … I obviously I'd never do that."
Participant: It might be a little less threatening than saying "Have you raped somebody?"

Context of the situation

In addition to the idea that a Likert scale might be less threatening than yes–no questions about whether they had engaged in sexually coercive behavior, participants also suggested that along with the "threatening" questions (questions that made respondents uncomfortable) about sexual offenses, the researchers should include questions about the context of these situations. Many of them also alluded to an underlying perspective of responsibility for the sexually assaultive behaviors. They suggested that responsibility could be placed on the perpetrator based on the legal system's definition of sexual assault, or more specifically, statutory rape. Participants suggested that the law indicates some actions are rape when in fact the context of the situation suggests something different. They indicated the importance of context with regard to age group. For example, parents of a teenage daughter who is dating and having sex can pursue statutory rape charges even if the teen believes she was not coerced. Men who engage in these acts, especially if they are just a few years older, might also not perceive their behavior as sexual assault perpetration. As noted, the situation could be interpreted differently when adults rather than children and adolescents are involved. Participants thought that giving examples of minors engaged in sex play and experimentation could pose significant problems for the researchers attempting to study sexual assault.

Participant: The concept of rape is an adult concept, you know … seen by authority and described, mandated with prescribed punishments or whatever else by authority. Kids—you know, it's difficult to regulate activities of minors.

Participant: They're experimenting, whether it be with drugs, sex, other types of activities. It's part of their learning and—and maturation process. And … things like this … questions that are presented or the presentation of, let's just say—I'm gonna read, uh, Statement 1: "engaged in sex play (fondling, kissing, and petting—or petting, but not intercourse with a woman) she didn't want to … by overwhelming her with continual arguments and pressure." Well … you know, that's to me, that looks like … you can reflect back on that. That looks like an adolescent thing, where … persistency, you know, to finally break down either a barrier or inhibition. That's very presentable, because adults, for the most part, they've already established their own sense of identity, and … uh, either they do or they don't, instead of it, you know, having to convince her.

Perception of guilt

Focus group participants suggested that when some survey respondents reflect back on sexual experiences during their lifetime, they might have committed some of the acts listed in the survey and feel guilty about those past actions. Because of these guilt feelings or remorse, participants might have pushed the memories into their subconscious so that they don't have to deal with them. Answering the survey questions can cause respondents to confront the memories of their past when they would prefer to move away from memories that might be painful or might cause some survey respondents to reconstruct or lie about their past behaviors and actions. Some focus group participants indicated that reading the survey questions made them feel that they were assumed to be "guilty" of some of them. When the facilitator indicated that the purpose of the survey was not to assess guilt or innocence, the participants stated that if someone acted on any of the behaviors listed, they were guilty. The focus group members' perception that guilt is significant was also evident in their thoughts about compensation for completing the survey (i.e., respondents who had engaged in such behaviors might feel guilty about accepting compensation for participating in a study).

Victim perspective

In the victim perspective, the concern is with the onus of responsibility for perpetrating sexual assaultive behaviors. It also represents the perception that

at one time a man might have engaged in behaviors associated with sexual assault, such as pressuring a woman to have sex, but they mature out of these behaviors as they age and might no longer feel culpable.

Age

To promote fairness or balance, the men in the focus group seemed to want to negate behaviors committed during adolescence because men might not engage in these behaviors in adulthood. They thought that admitting to sexually assaultive behaviors committed during teenage years unfairly positions a man as a sexual offender, when in fact, as an adolescent or young adult he might have been unfamiliar with society's norms regarding negotiating sexual encounters.

Participant: Also, one thing I thought about is: my behavior over time has changed.

Participant: Things I did when I was in my teens and 20s are different than what I'm doing now.

Participant: Yes, actually. If it was something I did way in the past, I would probably be a little bit more honest—again, I would temper it with some of the more major things that seemed wrong. I'd still might not be that honest. If I would be ashamed my whole life. But, you know, if I was older and I'd say, "Yeah, in the 20s we were both drunk and I had got her really drunk and took advantage of her and—it wasn't right, but what did I know, I was young and everybody was doing it." It's easier to say that when I'm 40 than when I was—that—right then, that age. That's my gut feeling.

Participants indicated that in their past, most men have engaged in sexual activities or behaviors of which they are not proud, and these incidents might not rise to the level of rape, but approach the idea of sexual assault. Participants stated that during the teenage years when young men are experimenting, they might have engaged in some of the activities the researchers listed on this sheet. As men age, some continue to act as they did during their teenage years, whereas others mature and cease those behaviors. Participants believe that men who stop pressuring women for sex, for example, are those who understand that they must act in a manner that is in accordance with societal norms. Thus, some participants stated that their initial reaction to the questionnaire is one of "that's not me, I don't do that," even if they might have done so in their youth.

Participants indicated that because behavior changes as people mature, survey questions about sexual assault should reflect this difference and maturation process. This suggests that men might be more forthcoming in

answering questions about sexual assault that were worded to indicate the person committed a specific act in the past (e.g., during his teenage years) instead of during adulthood.

Another aspect of the search for fairness or balance is participants' acknowledgment that boys and men might have also been sexual assault victims. Participants suggested that the survey also include questions about the respondents' experience of being the victim of sexual assault to assuage the guilt that comes from answering questions about perpetrating sexual assault.

Respondent perspective

Respondent is the last perspective that emerged from the focus groups. Respondents are individuals who would answer a survey about sexual assault whether or not they have been a perpetrator or victim. Respondent perspectives focus on the mechanics of the survey instruments and of survey participation. As focus group participants discussed problems surrounding the respondent perspective, they focused on the presentation of one's self, maintenance of anonymity, and several aspects of survey administration as ways to increase respondent participation and honesty.

Presentation of one's self

Participants indicated that they see answering survey questions as a form of self-presentation. They also suggested that potential respondents might be reluctant to answer questions about sexual assault on the phone because asking about these behaviors is offensive, and many people do not like to discuss sexual activity on the phone. To promote honesty, they suggested emphasizing the study's legitimacy by making sure the researchers clearly identify themselves and their affiliation.

> Participant: I'd want to know *who* was doing the survey; why they were doing it; are they reputable. And, even then, I'm not sure I'd like to admit to some things I'm not proud of.

Anonymity

Focus group participants emphasized that anonymity (rather than confidentiality) is of the utmost importance in encouraging those who had engaged in sexual assault perpetration to participate. They insisted that anonymity be maintained throughout the survey process, including offering, providing, and delivering compensation for participation in ways that permit respondents continued assurance of their anonymity. Using these mechanisms,

respondents remain in control of the information they give and might be more inclined to answer honestly.

> Participant: I just think more anonymous, you know, you're going to get these people that are going to be more honest and get more people to respond.

Survey administration

In terms of administration, participants said they would feel more comfortable completing a survey about sexual assault on the Web rather than doing so in person or over the telephone. In addition, one participant indicated that he is used to completing questionnaires about behavior, so for some people, these questionnaires might be commonplace.

Participants thought that easing the respondents into the topic of sexual assault would be preferable to asking questions about this topic without preparing the respondent. They suggested that respondents be asked questions about other people's behaviors before being asked questions about their own behavior as a way of making these behaviors seem less extraordinary. In this way, questions about one's own behaviors might seem less shocking to the respondent and perhaps to the interviewer, who might having difficulty sounding neutral about the topic.

Participants also suggested that having a well-known personality endorse the study might also increase people's willingness to participate.

> Participant: If this study was endorsed by a well-known personality, like Dr. Andrew Weil, or somebody. People … would be willing to participate. … Or Dr. Phil.

Participants suggested surveying populations from retirement homes, fraternity houses, sorority houses, housing co-ops, and department stores to get a good cross-section of respondents. They also added that regardless of the places used to sample, it is important to consider how anonymity will be maintained. Participants also listed factors that could influence a respondent's answers to a survey, such as ease with the question (e.g., using nonthreatening wording), the method used to administer the survey (e.g., phone vs. Internet surveys), the level of detail the respondent is asked to consider and provide (e.g., asking about his teenage experiences with dating), and words used to describe the acts in question (e.g., sexual assault, perpetration, or coercion).

Participants also shared their concerns about questionnaire layout. According to the participants, questions that start with the same wording (e.g., see Questions 1–3 and 4–6 in Figure 1) were perceived as repetitive, which might make respondents skip them. They felt the survey could be improved by simplifying it and restructuring it to capture respondents' attention so that they do not lose interest while taking the survey. Figure 3 captures some of the ways respondents thought the survey could be restructured to improve participation.

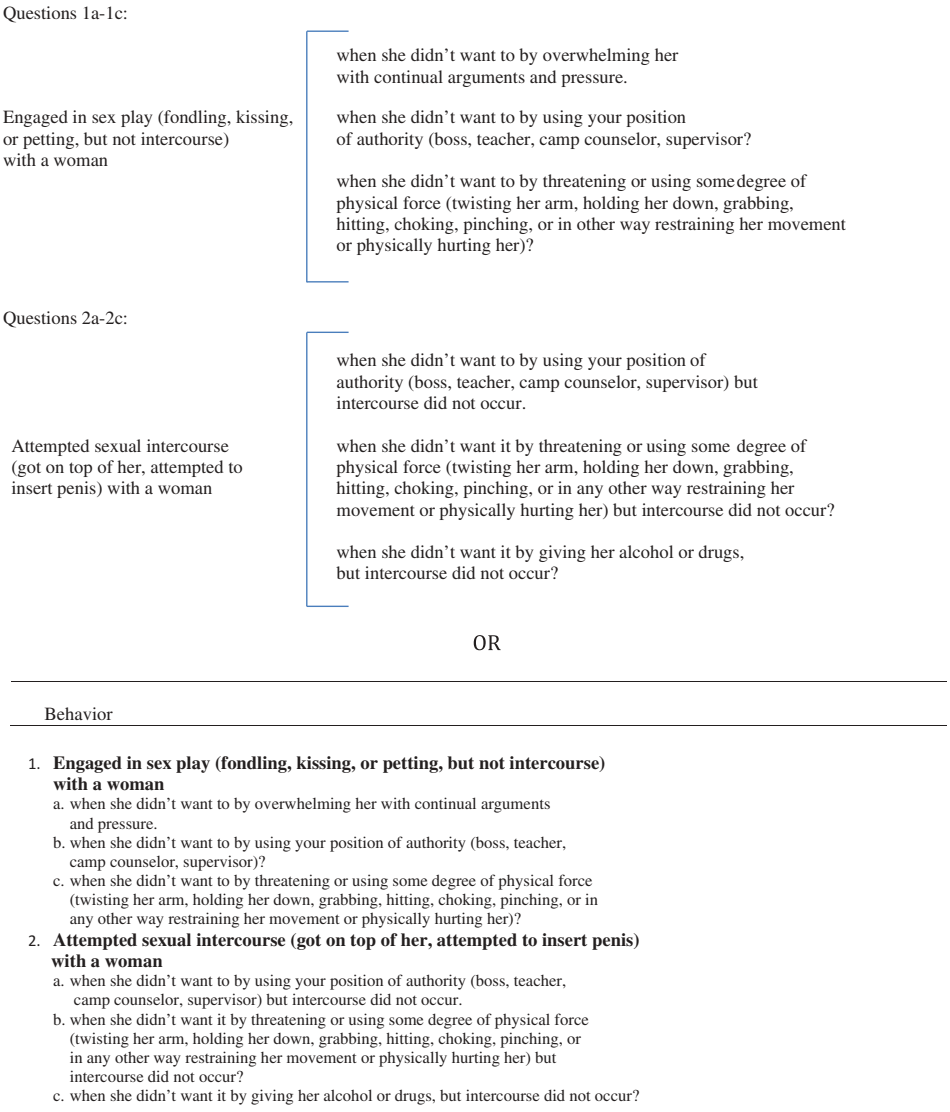

Figure 3. Suggested rearranged layout of the questionnaire.

Challenges with survey completion

Participants also emphasized delivering the survey in a manner that ensured anonymity because they believe that a lot of people keep histories of sexually assaulting another person buried for years and never tell anyone else. Anonymity to them means not only the lack of identifying information, but also limited interaction between the survey administrator and the survey respondent. The focus group participants attempted to unpack ways of delivering an anonymous survey. They considered the following modalities: random-digit dialing, Web-based surveys, and calls to a toll-free phone number.

Participants believed that telephone surveys provide respondents a degree of assurance of anonymity. They also suggested using a toll-free number so that the respondents would be able to call from convenient locations at a good time. This would promote greater anonymity. They also believed that in telephone interviews about sexual assault, respondents would be careless in their responses because they want to get off the phone quickly or for a range of other reasons (e.g., not trusting who is on the other end, being uncomfortable holding the receiver for a long time, sensitiveness of the subject matter, and feeling pressured to answer, to name a few). Alternatively, some respondents might attempt to fool the researcher by providing false or exaggerated answers about the true nature of their sexual behaviors.

> Participant: Then again, it's two problems. You've got … where people are consciously lying to you; they know that they did it and they don't want to tell you that they did it. And then … a lot of these questions lend themselves to people not recognizing that they did it.

Participants thought that taking the survey on the Web would allow respondents to complete the survey without incriminating themselves to another person. Respondents would also have the opportunity to change their prior answers if they felt that they do not want to reveal such information later in the process of taking the survey. Thus, phone and in-person interviews provide respondents less control over the information provided because they must answer spontaneously, whereas via the Web, they can make changes as they see the need to do so. Also, because no individual administers a Web survey directly (as compared to in-person or phone interviews), the respondent is less likely to feel he is being judged.

Participant: A person-to-person thing, you're gonna be a little bit like: "I'm incriminating myself by telling this person I did duh, duh, duh, duh."

Participant: 3You can also change your mind, you know, just—OK, I don't want to answer this question; you can erase it and choose another one. But on the phone, you cannot.

Ways to increase respondent's likelihood of providing information

Focus group participants suggested that offering incentives could increase participation.

Facilitator: So what approach might work?

Participant: Yeah, if there's—uh, you know—if there's compensation involved.

Participant: If it were similar to this. If there were free food and compensation, maybe.

Participant: But I don't think I—you know, would participate if somebody just walked up to me, "Hey, uh, answer these questions for me?" No, I don't have time.

Participant: Right. Right. It might be a little too much personal information for giving you something and you're not giving me anything.

Participants also stressed wording questions in nonthreatening ways, including ways that would not make participants feel they were being judged. This also demonstrates that the researcher is not attempting to harm the respondent. Privacy again emerged as a concern.

Participant: Obviously, it's sensitive stuff, though. It's the kind of thing that people are gonna be maybe a bit skeptical, even if you're assured of your privacy.

Participant: So writing something on paper is kind of dicey. If somebody was asking me questions, it's a little less dicey. If something was even more random, like, go to any one of these computer terminals, sit down and answer the questions and leave, maybe even that feels more anonymous.

Participant: But then again, would anybody know? If nobody knows, I'll do it.

Discussion

According to focus group participants, anonymity is of prime importance when asking individuals to respond to a survey about the sensitive topic under discussion. Although participants suggested multiple modalities for conducting surveys, such as using random-digit dialing, calls to a toll-free number, focus groups, or conducting surveys at a trusted institution in a community (e.g., setting up a booth to collect surveys at a church) and using multisite recruitment to increase sample representativeness (e.g., church, mall, and jail), they favored Web-based surveys for collecting data on sexual assault perpetration behavior. Participants' belief that Web surveys would produce higher response rates or more honest responses conflicts with DiNitto et al.'s (2008) findings that telephone respondents reported a wider range of sexually coercive behaviors, perhaps because responses to questions administered by an interviewer are more spontaneous. As expected, DiNitto et al.'s Web survey respondents were younger and had more formal education, whereas their telephone survey respondents were more diverse. The men who participated in this study's focus groups reiterated the benefits of minimal interaction between researcher(s) and survey respondents and limiting the chance of implicating themselves or being judged by another person,

again drawing attention to the subject of ensuring anonymity. Participants thought that asking questions about sexual behavior on the phone was highly inappropriate and would never generate honest responses. According to them, Web surveys will also allow respondents more flexibility with time and to change their answers if they want without succumbing to any undue pressures that might occur in a telephone survey using interviewers. They also indicated that Web surveys would increase respondents' comfort in completing the survey, give them more control of the information they provide, and increase honesty. Focus group participants believed that compensating respondents for taking time to complete the survey is another way of generating honest responses.

Focus group participants also believed that boys and men's understanding of sexual encounters changes along with their behavior as they mature. Therefore, surveys should be worded to include time frames or the age at which perpetration behaviors might have occurred, which could give men ways of indicating that such behaviors occurred in the past but do not reflect the person they are today. Another important subject participants identified was that respondents should be asked about their experience of being victims of sexual assault so that the design of the questionnaire does not assign blame solely to respondents, but rather attempts to recognize that an individual might be a victim as well as a perpetrator. This might also help mitigate the culpability that respondents could experience from answering questions about sexual assault perpetration.

Further, as is often done in surveys, focus group participants thought the flow of the questions should move respondents from answering easier to more difficult questions about their own behaviors rather than beginning with questions that might seem more shocking to them. Finally, there was considerable emphasis on the arrangement of the questionnaire items, especially with regard to how items were perceived while being read. Participants underscored that poor questionnaire layout could be a major distraction to the respondents and to the data collection process, especially if items seem repetitive or did not capture respondents' attention (see Figures 1 and 3).

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the study's results, the authors made the following recommendations. First, with regard to survey methodology, it is too early to say which modality (Web-based surveys, telephone surveys, focus groups, or other methods) will be most successful in obtaining information about sexual assault perpetration. Even though focus group respondents expressed a clear preference for Web-based surveys because they can provide respondents greater convenience, control over responses, and

assurances of anonymity, respondents should be offered their choice of survey completion method out of respect for their participation and to increase participation. Second, given the importance participants placed on incentives, different amounts and types of incentives could be provided and studied, perhaps depending on the type of survey method and the time or other burdens they place on respondents (e.g., focus group, computer/Web-based, or telephone), to determine which incentives might increase participation and respondent interest without creating undue influence to participate. Third, regardless of whether surveys are administered in paper format, via computer, or by telephone, the questionnaire or survey design or layout is important and should allow respondents to easily comprehend each question and answer without difficulty or confusion. Fourth, questionnaire or survey wording is paramount in terms of drawing participants' interest. Questions should be straightforward and wording should minimize feelings of guilt so that respondents will not be in an uncomfortable position that might deter them from completing the survey. Fifth, a Likert scale format for answering survey questions about sexually coercive behavior could be less threatening and more appealing to study participants because it gives them a greater range of responses (i.e., more nuanced response categories) from which to choose than yes–no responses allow. Sixth, contextualization of questions (e.g., noting age at which a sexually coercive behavior might have occurred and relationship to the other party involved) could also contribute to increased understanding of questions and higher response rates to questions. Finally, researchers should place great importance on respondents' anonymity to increase survey participation. Studies such as this one can provide better understanding of men's sexual perpetration and contribute to preventing sexual assault.

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