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SHADES OF GRAY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TERMS USED IN THE MEASUREMENT OF SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION

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Methodological analyses of sexual victimization research are still rare, despite the explosion of interest in this topic and widely varying rates across studies. In-depth analysis of the meaning of differences in rates is especially lacking. A series of five ethnically and geographically diverse focus groups were held to explore how wording in sexual victimization surveys affects the reporting of various types of negative sexual experiences. Participants provided rich formulations about sexual intercourse that suggest there is a wide range of coercion, from peer pressure to lose one's virginity to partner pressure to demonstrate one's commitment to stereotypical forced rape. Focus group participants asserted that many terms that are often used synonymously, such as *unwanted*, *nonvoluntary*, and *forced*, have distinct meanings. They also described how different social pressures on women and men, and differences in physical size lead to inevitable differences in perceptions of coerciveness. Although recent sexual victimization surveys have increased the specificity of descriptions of sexual acts, these findings suggest that it is equally important to be precise in communicating what is meant by coercion.

Studies on sexual victimization vary tremendously in the rates they obtain. Rates of rape have varied from 2% to 25% in community samples and range even higher in clinical samples (Koss, 1993). A review of childhood sexual abuse found published rates ranging from 2% to 62% (Bolen & Scannapieco, 1998). These huge ranges produce controversy about "true" rates of sexual victimization and confusion about appropriate legal and policy responses. While some of this range is due to random variation, it is now apparent that methodological factors also have consistent effects on estimates of sexual victimization (e.g., Bolen & Scannapieco, 1998; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss, 1993). In this paper we review what is known about the effects of questionnaire characteristics on the assessment of sexual victimization and describe how we used focus groups to explore qualitatively an understudied issue, that of the impact of word choice in questionnaire items.

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Definitions, Number of Items, and Questionnaire Context

Previous research has examined effects of the operational definitions of sexual victimization, the number of questions about sexual victimization, and the overall context of the questionnaire on obtained rates of sexual victimization. Differences in definitions do appear to contribute to the range in sexual victimization estimates. In a quantitative review of studies on childhood sexual abuse, Bolen and Scannapieco (1998) found that definitions that are restricted to intercourse produce lower rates than those that include other forms of sexual assault. A number of researchers have found a similar pattern for adult sexual assault (e.g., Koss & Oros, 1982; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The other major finding from Bolen and Scannapieco's quantitative review was that the total number of questions about forced sex was also highly correlated with obtained prevalence rates. They found that questionnaires with fewer than four questions on sexual victimization produced significantly lower rates than longer questionnaires.

The overall context of the questionnaire and the specificity of questions also affect the disclosure of sexual victimization. Probably the best-known example of these issues is the differences between the original National Crime Survey (NCS) and its 1992 redesign into the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). The original NCS collected rape prevalence statistics based only on respondents who reported a rape to questions about general assault that were asked in the context of other crimes. Nothing in

the items encouraged respondents to think about sexual or nonstranger assaults, and consequently the rates were extremely low (Eigenberg, 1990; Koss, 1996). The redesign of the survey added specific wording on rape and "sexual attacks" and enhanced cues to think of known perpetrators (Kindermann, Lynch, & Cantor, 1997). The redesign, while resulting in an increase of 40% in all forms of victimization, produced a 250% increase in reports of rape (Lynch, 1996), suggesting that rape had been particularly poorly assessed in the original NCS.

Despite the large increase in rape rates between the NCS and NCVS, there is evidence that the NCVS items still do not identify as much sexual victimization as other measures. The National College Women Sexual Victimization (NCWSV) study included an experimental comparison of the redesigned NCVS items with items that described sexual incidents in behaviorally specific terms. An example of such an item is ". . . has anyone made you have sexual intercourse by using force or by threatening to harm your or someone close to you? Just so there is no mistake, by intercourse I mean putting a penis in your vagina." (Fisher et al., 2000, p. 6; also see Kilpatrick, Edmunds, & Seymour, 1992; and Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Strikingly, the NCWSV study found that behaviorally specific items identified 11 times more completed rape and 6 times more attempted rape than the NCVS items (Fisher et al., 2000). Further, crime surveys probably pull for more serious or less ambiguous incidents (Lynch, 1996; Percy & Mayhew, 1997). This likely leads to an underreporting of nonstranger assaults in particular. Surveys on "crime" produce lower rates than surveys on "relationships," "women's health," or related contexts, which are generally seen as preferable for measuring intimate victimization (Eigenberg, 1990; Hamby & Finkelhor, 2000; Koss, 1996; Lynch, 1996).

Terminology for Sexual Victimization

To date, the major word choice issue that has been identified is problems associated with use of the word *rape* to inquire about sexual victimization. Although the NCVS and other surveys still use the term rape, ample evidence shows that only a minority of women reporting forced sex will also describe that experience as a rape. Rape appears to be preserved for labeling the stereotypical crime of a stranger assault in many women's minds (Koss, 1988; Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dansky, Saunders, & Best, 1993). Only a third of women reporting forced sex on the British Crime Survey responded affirmatively to a follow-up question asking whether that experience was a rape (Percy & Mayhew, 1997). Only 47% of women reporting completed rape in the NCWSV study responded "yes" to a similar question (Fisher et al., 2000). The omission of the word rape from a Canadian national survey appears to be one reason for a substantial increase in the reporting of sexual assaults (Koss, 1996). Stets and Pirog-Good (1989) found that only 40% of respondents reporting either physical or sexual assault in dating relationships perceived the relationship to be abusive.

Other legal terms such as *sexual assault* are problematic as well. Including such terminology in the wording of sexual assault measures raises the reading requirements to college level (Gylys & McNamara, 1996). Even respondents with that level of reading ability may be unfamiliar with legal terms and definitions. Legal terminology causes obvious problems in usability with representative samples. Most measurement experts currently recommend behavioral descriptions for survey assessment (Koss, 1996; Percy & Mayhew, 1997; Resnick et al., 1993; Smith, 1994).

Assessing Varying Degrees of Coercion

Moving away from the terms rape and sexual assault has raised additional issues, however. To assess adequately different types of coerced sexual experiences, it is important to carefully clarify the type of force involved (Gylys & McNamara, 1996; Koss, 1996). The use of terms such as *force* or *psychological coercion* might include situations such as continual nagging and pressuring, threats to end the relationship, false promises, and similar strategies that are not desirable but at the same time are not crimes (Koss, 1996). It is particularly important that such behaviors are not counted in the number of rapes or attempted rapes both in order to avoid artificially inflating these statistics and also to avoid mistakenly giving the impression that men and women experience forced sex in near equal numbers. At the same time, it is equally important to acknowledge lesser degrees of sexual coercion in considering the full psychological, social, and economic impact of coerced sex. In addition to the sexual assault literature, other research on sexuality offers insights on negative aspects of sexual experiences.

Numerous studies have found that women rate first intercourse experiences much more negatively than men do, using terms like *dislike*, *disaster*, and *guilt* to assess responses (e.g., Darling, Davidson, & Passarello, 1992; Nicholas, 1994; Sprecher, Barbee, & Schwartz, 1995). Some studies on first intercourse include terms that suggest some level of coercion, although they may not be intended to assess sexual assault. For example, women cite partner pressure as a major reason for first intercourse much more often than men do. Darling et al. (1992) reported that 39% of women said that pressure from their partner was a major reason they participated in first intercourse, compared to only 9% of men. Similarly, Koch (1988) found that 24% of women gave partner pressure as the reason first intercourse happened, compared to only 7% of men, in her sample of undergraduates. Ingham, Woodcock, and Stenner (1991) found that more than a quarter (28%) of the women in their sample reported that situational pressure was one of the major reasons they engaged in first intercourse, compared to only 8% of the men in their sample reporting the same reason. Men, on the other hand, were much more likely to report engaging in sex due to peer pressure than women

(43% versus 13%). Qualitative answers indicated that being a virgin was stigmatizing for males. Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994), however, found that peer pressure was reported by less than 5% of either men or women.

Laumann et al. (1994) also assessed the degree of "wantedness" of first intercourse. In their measure, participants could choose between first sex being "something you wanted to happen at the time, something you went along with, but did not want to happen, [or] something that you were forced to do against your will." Conceptualized this way, a quarter of women reported that their first encounter was unwanted and 4% that it was forced. A very large majority of males (92%), on the other hand, described their first encounter as wanted, with not quite 8% describing it as unwanted and less than 1% reporting it was forced.

Differential Effects of Questionnaire Characteristics Across Racial, Ethnic, and Socioeconomic Groups

A number of studies have examined racial or ethnic differences in rates of unwanted and forced sexual experiences (Golding, 1996; Moore, Nord, & Peterson, 1989; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Weber, Gearnig, Davis, & Conlon, 1992). Although differences are sometimes found, no clear pattern has emerged. Further, results are sometimes hard to interpret because there are not always large numbers of minority group members in study samples (e.g., Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Class differences in sexual victimization have been examined more rarely, but some studies of intimate physical victimization have found that class differences can intersect with ethnic differences. For example, Russo, Denious, Keita, and Koss (1997) found that lower-income Black women had higher rates of partner abuse, but not childhood abuse, compared to higher-income Black women.

From a measurement perspective, the primary issue regarding these findings is whether variations in rates are measurement artifacts due to the differential validity of questions for different ethnic or class groups. There is some evidence that group differences in response to survey methodology may affect reported victimization rates. The redesigned NCVS produced greater increases in reporting for Whites than for Blacks, and for persons earning more than $15,000 per year than those earning less than that (Kindermann et al., 1997). College students whose parents had more education showed more effects to a manipulation in response categories than students with less educated parents in another study (Hamby, Sugarman, Boney-McCoy, & Straus, 2001). There are numerous reasons why reporting may differ for different ethnic or socioeconomic groups. There could be less rapport when interviewer and respondent come from different social groups, which is more likely to be true for minority and lower SES respondents as interviewers are more likely to be from the majority middle-class culture. People who come from cultural groups that are oppressed in the United States have a history that may lead them to doubt the confidentiality of reports to the Federal government or other institutional sponsors of research. One older study found that men and Black respondents reported more suspicions than women and White respondents about research participation, such as what the true risks were and whether confidentiality would really be protected (Singer, 1984). Surveys are often offered only in the dominant cultural language and are inaccessible to recent immigrants or others who do not speak that language. In a Toronto survey of violence against women, 40% of refusals were related to language barriers (Smith, 1985). Language barriers probably also affect measurement error.

The social desirability of certain behaviors also differs among groups. Cultural groups that are more religious and have more strict religious doctrines are less tolerant of premarital sex than other groups, for example (Cochran & Beeghley, 1991). The form and structure of individuals' personal narratives may also differ across cultural and ethnic groups. Not all cultures are as focused on time or think in such compartmentalized ways as is promoted in European American culture. Surveys tend to be constructed in ways that are congruent with the dominant culture's mode of expression (Dana, 2000). American surveys are often very abstract, ask the respondent to think about life events in terms of frequency counts, and collect data about incidents in a piecemeal rather than holistic fashion. Alternative formats, such as unstructured interviews or focus groups that allow participants to verbally describe experiences in their own words, may yield richer data for other groups.

On the other hand, there are also many reasons why self-report is often similar across ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Sexual activity is a familiar domain to most respondents. With the advent of modern media, members from a variety of groups within a culture are likely to be exposed to similar programs and news stories. The use of common and specific behavioral terms increases the likelihood that all respondents who are fluent in the interview language(s) will understand the questions. Victimizations are often memorable events and many respondents can readily provide details about them. Efforts to improve confidentiality are likely to be appreciated by anyone who finds the discussion of forced sex to be intimate and personal.

Effects of Terminology Differences on Rates

Laumann et al.'s (1994) measure suggests that both women and men were making a distinction between wantedness and force. No systematic attention has been paid to differences produced by wording about the degree of coercion involved in the assault. A review of a variety of questionnaires that include multiple questions on sexual victimization indicate that asking about unwanted sexual intercourse will produce rates that are 2.6 to 25.3 times higher than asking about forced or nonvoluntary intercourse (see Table 1). It is apparent that variations in terms to

Table 1

Item-Level Rates Obtained by Measures that Ask Multiple Questions on Coerced Intercourse

MEASURE	*SAMPLE*	*ITEM*	*RATE*
National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG); Abma, Driscoll, & Moore, 1998	F Nationally representative	Which number would you say comes closest to describing **how much you wanted** that first sexual intercourse to happen? On this scale, a 1 means that you really didn't want it to happen at the time, and a 10 means that you really wanted it to happen.	26.4% (1 to 4 on 10-pt scale)
		Would you say then that this first sexual intercourse was **voluntary or not voluntary?**	9.1% (on a 10-pt. scale)
Sexual Experiences Survey (SES); Koss & Oros, 1982	F College student	Have you ever had sexual intercourse with a man when you **didn't really want to because you felt pressured** by his continual arguments?	21.4%
		Have you ever had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't want to because he **used some degree of physical force** (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.)?	8.2%
Sexual Experiences Survey; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987	College Students Nationally repesentative	Have you given in to sexual intercourse when you didn't want to because you were overwhelmed by a man's continual arguments and pressure?	25%
		Have you had sexual intercourse when you didn't want to because a man threatened or used some degree of physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.) to make you?	9%
Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2); Straus et al., 1996	B College student	My partner **insisted** on sex **when I did not want to** (but did not use physical force)	13.5%[a]
		My partner **used force (like hitting, holding down, or using a weapon)** to make me have sex.	1.4%[a]
National Health and Social Life Survey; Laumann, Gagnon, Michaels, & Michaels, 1994	F Nationally repres	Was your first experience of sexual intercourse something you wanted to happen at the time, **something you went along with but did not want to happen,** [or] something that you were **forced to do against your will?**	24.5% not wanted 4.2% forced
	M Nationally repres		7.6% not wanted 0.3% forced
Newton-Taylor, DeWit, & Gliksman, 1998	F College student	Have you been **coerced into having sex when you did not want to?**	12%
		Have you been a **victim of date rape?**	2

Notes. Emphases added. F = Females; M = Males; B = Both combined
[a]Unpublished data, 1998.

represent coercion, such as force, nonvoluntary, insisted when I didn't want to and others lead to very large differences in reported rates. But how different are the actual incidents that are being reported? Virtually no attention has been paid to the *meaning* of reliable differences in rates. The use of these words in questionnaires seems almost accidental and the results from these different items are almost always combined into a single prevalence rate. Some questionnaires, such as Laumann et al.'s, set up a forced choice between terms such as wantedness and force. Others, such as the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG; Abma, Driscoll, & Moore, 1998) ask them in separate items. Nonetheless, NSFG researchers did not anticipate the large differences that were found across items. In that nationally representative sample, nearly three times as many women described their experience of first intercourse as unwanted in comparison to nonvoluntary. Merely observing the differences does not explain them. These terms have been in use in sexual victimization research for more than 20 years, but the repeated finding of variation in rates has not in itself yielded any insight or consensus about the appropriate use of these terms or the effects on rates. The advent of the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth was seen as an opportunity to more systematically select terms to assess sexual victimization. The purpose of this project was to use qualitative focus groups to examine the effects of word choice on respondents. Qualitative research is well suited to examine the meaning behind differences in reporting.

METHOD

Participants

Focus groups were chosen as the best way to generate hypotheses about the meaning of reporting differences in responses to variations in questionnaire wording. An effort was made to recruit participants from groups that historically have had little voice in the design or interpretation of research studies on sexual assault. This was done not only to increase the relevance of the conclusions for nonmajority groups but also because this approach was viewed as the most likely to generate novel hypotheses and ideas that have not been discussed in the literature, which has primarily been written by middle-class, White women with liberal arts educations who identify themselves as feminists (a description that also fits the authors of this study).

African American women. One focus group comprised six African American women. They were recruited from the congregation of a Baptist church from a small town outside of Orlando, Florida. All of these women were 35 years old or older. The majority (67%) reported earning more than $25,000 a year.

Apache Indian women. A second focus group comprised nine Apache Indian women. They were recruited from office workers and their friends in a rural Arizona community. Most (89%) were full-blooded Apache, one (11%) was multiracial (Indian, Latina, and European American). Two-thirds were 35 and older. The majority (89%) had incomes of less than $25,000 per year, which is lower than the other groups.

Conservative Christian women. This group included nine female members of a conservative Baptist church in the Orlando, Florida area (not the same church that the African American women attended). They were recruited from among the membership of an adult Sunday school class. Most (89%) were European American, and one (11%) was Latina (Cuban). This group was younger than the other groups of women, with two-thirds being less than 35 years old. All of them reported income over $25,000 per year.

Rural men. Two men who are correctional officers at a jail in a small town in eastern Arizona made up the fourth group. They were recruited from local contacts. One was Latino (Mexican) and the other was European American. Both were under 35 years old and made less than $25,000 per year.

College men. Six men were recruited from among undergraduates at the University of New Hampshire for another group. Most (86%) were European American, one (14%) was Latino (Colombian). All were under 35 years old. While all had personal incomes under $25,000 per year, their family incomes are not known (and likely much higher).

Procedure

The first author conducted all groups with a research assistant. Each focus group was provided with the questions used in the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth. This survey was used because the National Center for Health Statistics was interested in revising their 2002 Cycle 6 survey to improve wording. They were also given an oral description of the NSFG survey, and a written and oral description of the general goals of the focus groups. See Table 2 for the NSFG questions.

After the informed consent process, participants were told about the unexpected finding that many women described their first sexual encounter as both unwanted and yet still voluntary during the 1995 NSFG interviews. The primary task given to participants was to explore what *unwanted*, *voluntary*, and *forced against your will* mean in the context of sexual experiences (again referring to the NSFG questions as in Table 2). The other major terminology issue addressed in each group was whether *sexual intercourse* has a single, generally understood meaning. Additionally, the issue of whether gender, cultural, ethnic, or age differences would affect respondents' understanding of these questions was covered in each group. In particular, the National Center for Health Statistics was considering expanding their interviews to include men for the first time and they wanted feedback on how men would respond to questions on sexual victimization and perpetration. While an attempt was made to cover these issues in each group, a rigid structure was not imposed in order to maximize the level and creativity of input from participants.

Each group member received $20 to help cover any incidental expenses they incurred (such as transportation and babysitting) and to reinforce the format, which emphasized seeking their consultation on conceptual problems presented by past research results. Each group was held in a location that was familiar to the participants. The Orlando group meetings were held in churches, the Arizona group meetings were held in the meeting room of a local restaurant, and the New Hampshire group meeting was held in a conference room on campus. The meetings lasted between one and two hours and took place over a period of three weeks. Participants were asked not to disclose any personal sexual victimization experiences in the group setting for confidentiality reasons. The facilitators were available after each meeting for anyone who wanted to talk privately or who became distressed. No participant showed any sign of distress. Indeed, several people communicated that participating in the group gave them a sense of satisfaction that they were helping to address the problem of sexual assault. Each group meeting was audiotaped. An undergraduate research assistant transcribed the audiotapes. Transcriptions

Table 2

Questions on Unwanted Sex from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth

1) Looking at the scale on Card C-3, which number would you say comes closest to describing how much you wanted that first sexual intercourse to happen? On this scale, a one means that you really didn't want it to happen at the time, and a ten means that you really wanted it to happen.

SHOW CARD C-3

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

REALLY DIDN'T WANT IT TO HAPPEN AT THE TIME — REALLY WANTED IT TO HAPPEN AT THE TIME

NOTE: IF R DOESN'T UNDERSTAND SCALE, PROBE: "Choose the number between 1 and 10 that best describes how much you wanted your first intercourse to happen. The bigger the number, the more you wanted it to happen. The smaller the number, the less you wanted it to happen."

2) Would you say then that this first sexual intercourse was voluntary or not voluntary?

VOLUNTARY. 1
NOT VOLUNTARY 2
REFUSED 8
DON'T KNOW 9

NOTE: VOLUNTARY MEANS R CHOSE TO HAVE SEX OF HER OWN FREE WILL.

3) At any time in you life, have you ever been forced by a man to have sexual intercourse against your will?
(*Or, if the respondent has already reported a rape*:) Besides the time you told your interviewer about earlier, have you ever been forced by a man to have sexual intercourse against your will?

YES 1
NO. 2

4) How old were you the very first time you were forced by a man to have sexual intercourse against your will?

were proofread against the original source tapes by the first author.

Analyses

A grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987) was adopted to interpret the results of the discussions. This involved identifying recurring themes through repeated reviews of the transcripts. The summary begins with discussion of word meaning, which also led off each group, and then moves to significant item characteristics that were discussed in the groups. The primary strengths of the results are the expression of what were, in many cases, quite subtle conceptual points about the construct of forced sex, and the offering of several unique ideas and considerations. Although there was general consensus on a number of points, these groups are not statistically representative samples and their ideas and opinions are not necessarily representative of any gender, ethnic, or religious group. The fact that many of the female respondents were over age 35 may have contributed to a certain sense of perspective about many matters of sexuality and possibly increased the comfort level of the discussions on this sensitive topic. In this summary, direct quotations are heavily relied upon to best capture the subtlety and creativity of participants' input.

RESULTS

Unwanted, Nonvoluntary, and Forced Are Not Equivalent Terms

All groups strongly felt that asking about the degree of wantedness was different from asking about nonvoluntary or forced sex. In particular, several participants commented that they thought many teenagers got involved in "passionate" situations and went along with sex although it was unplanned and unexpected. There were also many comments on the differences between internal pressure and external pressure, and how it can be difficult to distinguish between acting because of a perceived expectation of one's partner and being coerced.

Some emphasized the overlap of "unwanted" with "unplanned" or "unexpected." They felt that passionate feelings and getting caught up in a moment could sometimes interfere with more deliberate choices, especially among younger people. These experiences may not have

involved formal consent but may not involve any overt forms of coercion either.

> [T]hey were expecting a passionate type of relationship—kissing and that—and really didn't have in mind anything like this would occur and not realizing maybe how their hormones would react. . . . They really get into it and it becomes voluntary at the last, just prior to, because of the hormones. (African American woman)

> Like this [gestures to category on questionnaire], "really didn't want it to happen" at the time, that's like saying, "I didn't plan it," and this [category] "really wanted it to happen" that's like saying, "We planned this to happen on that day at that time." They may not have planned it, but it was still voluntary. (African American woman)

> [Y]ou get in a situation, and you say, 'Well, it just kind of got out of hand,' and that's different from saying somebody forced you to do something. (African American woman)

> Either that or she might have ambiguous feelings about her first time . . . about whether the timing was good, or the person was right. So, they may have been wanting a sexual experience to happen, but just had other feelings around it. (conservative Christian woman)

> Yeah, I was just going to say, he could be thinking in his mind he didn't really want to, but parts of his anatomy is saying, you know, go ahead. . . . You know, that's voluntary. (rural man)

Others focused on the issue of degree of coercion—whether pressure to keep a relationship or other types of nonphysical pressure might fit the idea of unwanted or nonvoluntary better than forced.

> That [having sex to keep a relationship] is different from force. Making a bad choice. (African American woman)

> Talking themselves [into it] . . . well it's kind of force because then it's not what you want but it's what the other person wants and then. (African American woman)

> It's funny, because to go back up to question #1, you said if somebody put a knife to your neck, you'd say anything, say, "Yes, that it feel good," but if you don't have a knife to your neck, and you're trying to save a relationship or you're saying you're in love, you'd say anything then. If he asked you if you really wanted to do it, "Yeah, yes." Does it really feel good, "Oh, yeah." And the knife is not held there. (African American woman)

> What's the difference between forced and involuntary, kind of, you know what I mean? If nobody's holding you down, is it still forced, is it still not *really* want to do this? That's where the gray comes in. (African American woman)

Another complication comes from the societal idea that women "lead men on." In particular, participants thought that women who had participated in earlier consensual kissing or other intimacies might feel they have given some form of "consent" whether they wanted to continue on to intercourse or not. Some of these comments also raised the issue of whether voluntary might imply "didn't actively resist."

> I think, too, that they're in the car. . . . They're necking and she thinks that she's led the guy on to that point, so because of that, she's kind of voluntarily moved him to that point and a lot of girls think that. And, because of that . . . she might not have really wanted it to happen, but she got too far into it before she stopped it. [Other:] Or she thought she got too far into it. [First:] Right. And, she didn't say, "No" by really say "*No!*" She might have been, "I really don't want this to happen, but I got too caught up in it, or got him too caught up in it and she lets it happen. (conservative Christian women)

> Yeah, what about the girls that think, "Well, I know I was assaulted or I was raped, but I led him on. . . . I bet that's what the 3 or 4's [on wantedness scale] were. . . . . that they got into a situation they felt out of control in. . . . Well, it's the difference between, when you're in a car, you say "No," you know, "Nah, I said NO, we're stopping here," than if you get caught up in something, really, and never really say, "I don't want this to happen." (conservative Christian woman)

> Or was your first encounter, that's the second question, was it voluntary, maybe put the word, I hate to say it, *force* back in there, that was it forced on you or something. That even though you didn't want it, you voluntarily did it. (African American woman)

Although some (both men) felt that nonvoluntary was more of an all-or-none characteristic.

> [I]f you're asking a two-part question, or whatever, was it voluntary or was it not voluntary, I mean basically what you're asking is were you raped? (college man)

> Really didn't want it to happen at the time. Really did, really didn't, what's "really?" I mean, it's ambiguous. So, you need to be clear, yes or no. Did you want it to happen or did you not want it to happen. Not "kinda," not "really," not "maybe." If you wanted to, you wanted to—if you didn't, you didn't. Now, if you didn't and you were made to, that's different. (rural man)

The Meaning of Force Used Alone Is Unclear

There was general consensus that just the word forced is vague. The group participants felt it was not clear if forced meant physical force, fear of physical force, or something else. Participants also stated, once again, that there are degrees of coercion, and while they might differ in severity, a variety of acts include an element of force. They generally felt that all levels of force and coercion should be considered in sexual victimization research.

> It might be physical force, it might be fear of physical force, too. I mean, you know, if you're out with some 300-pound football player and he's like, "Come on, come on, come on, you have to do this, or I'm going to die," or whatever . . . You know, if they felt like they were going to be forced, if they felt like there was going to be some physical retaliation or . . . [Other:] Other retaliation, like they get dumped on the highway, or whatever . . . (conservative Christian women)

> But, if they answer "yes" maybe you could then go through different types of force. Was it verbal force, was it intimidation, was it physical, was it, you know, so that way you would definitely hear the man's side, you know, he was forced, but then you define the force, you know, well, she just talked me into it, I felt like she would tell all our friends I wasn't a big enough man, or something. (conservative Christian woman)

> Now, does *against her will* include seduction, does it include coercing, maybe using alcohol, maybe the date rape drug, would all those be considered against her will? What if you got her to change her mind? (rural man)

> Or pressure from other guys to have sex with a girl [on coercion men experience]. (rural man)

Be As Explicit As Necessary to Be Clear, but Do Not Ask Unnecessarily Graphic Questions

Many participants appeared to believe that some of the confusion about terminology was due to a reluctance to be as sexually graphic as necessary to be perfectly clear. While some participants seemed uncomfortable with explicit terminology, most seemed to feel that it was preferable to be explicit and get good data than to use potentially ambiguous terms like unwanted or nonvoluntary and then not be sure about exactly what you have. Especially as these euphemisms are going to conjure explicit behaviors and terms for most respondents anyway, the consensus seemed to be that little was gained from vague or "polite" wording.

> It ain't time to sugarcoat nothing. The times have come to be out in the open and be explicit with anything and everything, if that's what it takes. (African American woman)

> People curse and say anything else they want, why not say what you need to say to help someone? (African American woman)

> We're all adults here! (Apache Indian woman)

> Well, I think that you're worried about how you're going to make people feel, but if you really want to know, if you really want to know the answer, just ask the question. . . . I would rather, instead of trying to figure out what you're trying to ask me, I would rather it just be right there on paper and then I'll know what you want and then I'll answer . . . Because I would rather see that instead of beating around the bush. (conservative Christian woman)

Many people did feel that sexual intercourse was sufficiently explicit, but others disagreed.

> When you say sex, you're not thinking of kissing, you're thinking of penetration. (African American woman)

> Well, why would you need to get more graphic, though? (African American woman)

> Yeah, I think you can talk, but on a survey such as this, it is gonna serve a purpose to be more graphic than this word [intercourse]. (African American woman)

> See, on #3 also, it says *sexual intercourse*, some people define intercourse differently. Some people think oral sex, some think penetration, some think. . . . [someone calls out, "That's what Bill Clinton called it," laughter]. I know *penetrated* is probably a more graphic word, but, it tells you. (Apache Indian woman)

> They could say sexual experience instead of sexual intercourse. [Other:] Depends on the definition of that. Some people might think, "Well, we kissed, that was a sexual experience." (conservative Christian women)

Some participants appealed for simplification and clarity and informal language that would make them more comfortable:

> I have a comment. Like you were saying, you and your colleagues can whip these words around because you guys have worked with it for a long time, but when you're doing a survey, the amount of people that you're going to be dealing with, they're not used to whipping these words around and in some cases, they may not even understand exactly what you mean. You have to break it down because you're dealing with the common person and you guys are all doctors. When creating a survey like this, I think that has to be taken into consideration. (Apache Indian woman)

> Everything is so formal. 'Did you want to have sex?', 'Did you want him to stop?' You need to make it more personable. True, it's a survey, but . . . . (rural man)

Some participants objected to the term rape:

> I don't know if you would [get a more accurate response] if you use the word rape. You gotta think about ages of people that you're doing this for, too. Because what rape actually means when you say that. You have to be careful about people's perceptions. (conservative Christian woman)

> But I think if you use other ways of putting it [i.e., not using word rape] . . . that sound gentler, you'll come closer to getting a better answer. (college man)

> I just think they're harsh words [i.e., rape], they should use 'forced' or something. (college man)

People With Less Education May Have Difficulty With Terminology

> When you're dealing with people that are—you have your uneducated and your educated women, that depends, that kind of has something to do with it, I think. [Facilitator: What do you think would be easier for people who are less educated?] . . . there needs to be a midway, but, for people who can't really express themselves or explain what they want to say. . . . I didn't want it, but I still did it even though I didn't want to do it. (Apache Indian woman)

> Most guys might not even know the word *perpetrate*, what it means. (rural man)

> In essence, you have to know your audience. (Apache Indian woman)

Some Groups May Find Any Approach to the Topic of Sexual Victimization Upsetting

This issue was emphasized primarily in the group of conservative Christian women. Several participants felt that no matter how you phrase the questions, some people are going to be upset that you are asking about this area of life. They thought that older respondents who came of age in an era when sexuality was seldom discussed would be the most likely to be offended. Others in this group, however, dissented, and felt that even older adults would realize that norms have changed regarding discussion of such incidents.

> I think a lot of groups, you know, they don't talk about, you know, they've grown up in families or in ethnic groups they just don't talk about sex. They're not as open as we are about saying the word and for them to even say the word out loud or whatever is just, I think that would be very offending to some people. (conservative Christian woman)

> You see, if they talked to my mother-in-law on this, I mean, she would just, she would probably pass out dead on the floor. She would probably refuse to answer it. (conservative Christian woman)

> My mom would be like [makes horrified face]—it's none of your business. (conservative Christian woman)

Other participants felt that this was not a major concern. 'I think the *majority* of people it wouldn't offend.' (conservative Christian woman)

> You think with what we see on TV that sex isn't like it was when we were growing up. I mean, Lucy and them slept in separate beds, you know. . . . People see things differently. (conservative Christian woman)

> Well, it's good for people to get over that kind of . . . complex, you know? (rural man)

Participants Said Men Are Often Unaware of Their Partner's Experience of Being Coerced

Men may not be able to respond accurately to perpetration questions because of the inability to perceive when their overtures are unwanted. They also spoke about self-serving motivations to believe that consent was given. These are distinct issues from the more commonly discussed concern of whether perpetrators would be willing to report incidents in which they recognized their coercive behavior.

> [T]hey wouldn't even realize it and they would honestly say no. (African American woman)

> Maybe not at a young age they would realize that but as they get older then they realize, "yes, I did force myself on this young lady and she didn't really want to do it but she did because she was trying to hold on to this relationship." (African American woman)

> I was on [channel] 28 and I was looking at a thing on Justice File and it showed one lady, her rapist went free simply because he asked her, in the process of the rape, "Do you like it, did it feel good," and she told him "Yes." And he went free because she told the court that she told the man yes and he went free. . . . If someone with their hand around your neck or a knife to your throat, you'd tell him anything! (African American woman)

> She may say number 2, you know, up here on the question 1 [indicating low end of wantedness on a scale of 1 to 10]. He may say 10 and say she was probably a 7 or 8. (conservative Christian woman)

> 'She loved it.' Standard line. (conservative Christian woman)

> I don't think that some of them realize it though. . . . that they're perpetrators. Like, high school guys, I don't think that they ever realized that they were being perpetrators. (conservative Christian woman)

Opinions Varied as to Whether Questions Should Be Gender-Neutral or Gender-Specific

Some felt that, given that men are generally the perpetrators and women generally the victims, asking gender-specific questions was appropriate. On the other hand, a number of participants, while not questioning the gendered nature of sexual assault, nonetheless felt that it was wrong to perpetuate sexist divisions of any kind and hence recommended gender neutral questions. Interestingly, some participants seemed to feel that women were sharing a disproportionate burden of studying this social problem when women are asked victimization questions but men are spared from being asked to make such disclosures. There was some tendency for different groups to reach consensus on this, with more variation across groups than within groups.

> How many men have really been forced into their first act? (African American woman)

> Different for women and different for men, because men are going straight for the prize and women are not after that always, it's more like a company thing or someone to care thing, first. (African American woman)

> Different, because I think men have different intentions than women. (African American woman)

> I think, *victim* just for women, I think for the others it's so minute it's probably unnecessary, but definitely both for men. (conservative Christian woman)

> Well, if they need the statistics and they are asking women questions like this, then I don't see why the guy has to feel exempt from something like that as well. (Apache Indian woman)

> I was in a Circle K [convenience store] and you could see all the *Playboy*, *Penthouse* magazines and I go, "Where's the *Playgirl*?" and they go, "We're not allowed to sell that, we're not allowed to even have them in the store." . . . And, I think . . . women, we're subjected to all kinds of stuff, but the men are not. They're not, they're exempt . . . because they're men. . . . But, you know, that's just the way, I think women are subjected to a lot of other stuff and these surveys . . . you know, you can ask women all this stuff, oh, but you can't ask the men this. (Apache Indian woman)

The college men questioned whether men and women would perceive the questions in the same way. They thought that societal messages would discourage most men, including themselves, from thinking about any sexual experience in terms of coercion:

> "Didn't really want it to happen," . . . even if he didn't who's he going to say that to? I know when I was in high school, especially at that age, if you really didn't want it to happen, which I can't say I ever experienced that problem, it was never a problem of mine, but, let's say that did happen, I mean, I know that if I told most of my friends they'd be, like, "What's wrong with you?" (college man)

> So, then it's society, I don't know, guys are like always, "get some," that's how they were raised. It's like, especially when you get to high school and stuff, you know that's what you got to do, it's like, "Hey, let's all go out on Friday night, let's see what we can get," but, I mean girls aren't generally, that's not the stereotype that they were raised with. . . . So, if you offer them a scale, the way they've been raised is going to affect how they answer that on that scale. As opposed to if you just offer them a couple of choices, yes, you know, yes, it was voluntary, but you know, how much they wanted to admit how it actually happened in relation to how much it's a . . . relationship. That whether or not you're going to be called a slut or various other terms that we have—terms in our society that aren't applied to guys. (college man)

> Do you think that for a man to be sodomized it's the same psychologically as it is for a woman to be raped? (college man)

DISCUSSION

Degrees of Coercion: A Continuum of Sexual Victimization

The focus group participants asserted that coercion is a complicated construct that is not well captured by all-or-none conceptualizations of forced versus not forced. Coercion is even less well represented by the use of forced, unwanted, nonvoluntary and related words as synonyms for one another. In contrast to these two approaches to the construct of coercion, both common in the research literature, participants recognized that there is a continuum of degrees of coercion. On one end is physically forced compelling and on the other end are fully consensual acts. Between these two ends are many shades of gray. Participants agreed that unwanted, nonvoluntary, and forced, all describe experiences that fell on the coerced, negative end of the coercion continuum. Within the negative end of the spectrum, however, these words imply different degrees of coercion. In their view, unwanted implies less external coercion than nonvoluntary or forced. Additionally, forced tends to conjure up images of physical aggression whether it is explicitly defined that way in the question or not. At some point along the continuum, the degree of coercion falls below current legal standards for meeting the definition of a crime but still includes unwantedness.

The differences in meaning among these words have major implications for evaluating the adequacy of rates obtained in epidemiological studies and comparing rates across studies that use different questions to assess sexual assault. These include several major national projects. For example, the National Crime Victimization Survey funded by the National Institute of Justice uses the term forced

exclusively. Because forced represents the most extreme degrees of coercion, numerous incidents that still meet legal definitions of rape and sexual assault are likely not reported. This is probably one reason why NCVS methodology produces markedly lower rates than many other surveys (Fisher et al., 2000). The NCVS almost certainly misses the majority of acts that have health and psychological consequences for victims. Other major surveys, including the National Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Cloutier, Martin, & Poole, 2002), switch back and forth between unwanted and forced with no indication of whether differences in meaning are meant or not. It seems quite likely that this lack of attention to the degree of coercion is one reason that rates differ by as much as a factor of 25 in surveys on sexual victimization (see Table 1). This is also suggested by the common finding that severe forms of assault are less common than more minor forms of assault (e.g., Koss & Oros, 1982; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). This is true of sexual assault as well as other forms of interpersonal violence (e.g., NCVS data; Straus et al., 1996).

Given the explicit descriptions of sexual intercourse in the items of many recent surveys (e.g., Cloutier et al., 2002; Kilpatrick et al., 1992; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), it is surprising that nowhere in these surveys is coercion defined. The term *assault* in sexual assault is still unstandardized, even though the continuum of sexually assaultive acts was first recognized at least 15 years ago (Kelly, 1987). The Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss & Oros, 1982) remains one of the few measures to explore the construct of coercion. It does so by asking about different forms of coercion, including examples of physical force such as "holding you down" and examples of nonphysical force such as "threatened to end your relationship" (p. 456). There has been controversy about which items on the SES represent an assault, however, reflecting the legal and cultural confusions surrounding this issue (Gylys & McNamara, 1996). It is important to be aware that research definitions of coercion influence legal and cultural perceptions (Muehlenhard, Powch, Phelps, & Giusti, 1992).

The Effect of Gender on the Perception of Coercion

Another strong message communicated by focus group participants was the importance of gender in perceptions of coercion. According to participants, men's and women's views of the same sexual encounter can be very different. Part of their reasoning was based on the acknowledgement that victim and perpetrator roles in sexual assault are gendered—women comprise the majority of victims and men the majority of perpetrators. Participants also acknowledged that social roles and pressures are very different for men and women. According to them, men are more likely than women to experience pressure to lose their virginity and be regularly sexually active, whether they are in a relationship or not. Women are more likely to experience conflicting messages. On the one hand, societal messages aimed at women are more likely to advocate abstinence, delay of initiation of sexual activity, and having sex only in the context of a close relationship. Participants thought that some of these messages are less extreme now than for earlier generations. On the other hand, however, they reported that women often engage in sex in order to "keep" or save a romantic relationship, which demonstrates their desirability to men and improves their social status. Participants perceived that women are more susceptible than men to verbal pressure and threats from current and prospective romantic partners, because lack of a romantic partner is more stigmatizing for women than for men. Several participants also mentioned sex differences in size and strength as another factor that changed the meaning of coercion for men and women. Given these many differences between men and women, participants expressed considerable skepticism that men and women would perceive the coercive elements of sexual encounters in the same way, particularly in the absence of severe physical coercion. Consequently, they also questioned whether male and female reports of sexual coercion could be interpreted in the same manner.

Another gender issue raised by some participants that has received very little attention in the professional literature is the disproportionate burden that women bear as the primary group to address the problem of sexual assault. From their perspective as potential participants in research on violence against women, they felt that it was unfair that women shoulder the burden of disclosing their victimization experiences while men are frequently excused from such sensitive questions because there are many fewer male victims. While no one disputed that there were more female victims of sexual assault than male ones, some still felt that it helped share the responsibility of addressing the problem and promoted standards of fairness to ask men and women the same questions regarding sexual history. Because most participants expected that few women would have any perpetration history to report, there was almost no concern expressed about their willingness or ability to answer questions on perpetration. All participants were in favor of asking men questions about perpetration—the only debate that emerged was whether men should be asked only perpetration questions, or both perpetration and victimization questions.

Despite the unanimity of the participants' beliefs that men should be asked about perpetration, a number of participants felt that men would often be oblivious to the degree of coercion they had used with their partners. To them it was not only a matter that they might not report incidents that they recognized as abusive in order to present a positive self-description, but, more important, that they might not even personally recognize their own coercive behavior. One implication of this finding is that researchers should pay more attention to specifying what is meant by coercion

in items meant to measure perpetration as well. For example, it may improve assessment to use explicit statements such as, "when she did things like struggle or say 'no,' that I thought meant she was getting into it, but could have meant she didn't want sex."

The question of how gender should be incorporated into measures of sexual victimization is very complicated. A number of important issues, such as the assessment of same-sex victimization, were not addressed in these focus groups. Numerous measurement issues also remain unexplored. The effect on rates of making pronouns gender-neutral versus gendered in survey items is not known, for example. A great deal more research, both qualitative and quantitative, needs to be done on this topic.

Ethnic, Racial, Class, and Age Differences

In these ethnically diverse focus groups, members emphasized the similarities among men and women from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. No one suggested any wording or measurement issues that are specific to one ethnic or racial group. There was much less discussion of this issue than of the issue of differences between men and women, which participants saw as the main group characteristic relevant to the assessment of sexual victimization. Some participants, however, raised class issues, particularly with regard to literacy issues. Some also raised generational issues and thought that assessing sexual victimization among older women would be more difficult than interviewing younger women on this topic. This was due to their perception that older women were raised in climates that were less open to discussions of sexuality of all kinds.

Limitations

In considering these findings, it should be noted that an effort was made to solicit the opinions of a diverse group of individuals in order to increase the chances of generating a wide array of ideas. These groups are not, however, statistically representative samples and their opinions are not necessarily representative of any gender, ethnic, or religious group. Further, there are other important groups, such as college women, that could be included in future qualitative research. The group of rural men was smaller than the others and this may have affected the discussion in that group. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore issues that are difficult to capture in quantitative research, but quantitative research is often an appropriate way to provide further testing of the findings generated in a qualitative study.

The Future of Research on Sexual Victimization

Understanding the everyday vocabulary of coercion and sexuality is critical to an adequate assessment of sexual victimization. Qualitative research and theory development have key roles to play in furthering our understanding of the varieties of negative sexual experience. Phenomenological analyses of concepts and terms such as coercion, responsibility, and blame once figured prominently in social psychology literature (e.g., Heider, 1958/1983; Shaver & Drown, 1986). Unfortunately, vignette-based, quantitative research on the meaning of such constructs now prevails even though individuals' responses to vignettes often differ dramatically from responses to their own personal experiences (Hamby & Gray-Little, 2000). Frequency counts in epidemiological studies will always have their place in research and policy, but they should not be the only approach that is used to address the issue of sexual assault. Both quantitative and qualitative studies should allow respondents to describe the forms of coercion that were used in each incident of sexual victimization. Ideally, these forms would be described in specific, behavioral terms instead of general descriptors such as forced or unwanted. This would make the techniques for communicating the construct of coercion parallel to those now commonly used to communicate what is meant by sexual intercourse. Reducing confusion over terminology is key to continuing to improve our assessment of sexual victimization.

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