

“If She Didn’t Want to, That’s Rape”

College Male’s Interpretations of Survey Items Used to Measure Sexual Perpetration

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ABSTRACT

Background

The most widely used self-report measure of sexual victimization and perpetration, the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES), is currently undergoing revisions. While much research has focused on factors influencing female victimization disclosure and variables affecting validity, reliability, and utility of the SES when applied to victims, less is known about these factors in the assessment of men’s self-reported sexual aggression. Self-reported perpetration prevalence rates remain vastly incongruent with victimization levels, with rape perpetration rates often two thirds lower than victimization rates. It has been postulated that SES wording may not be congruent with many men’s perceptions of their previous sexual events, resulting in an underreporting bias.

Objectives

To obtain qualitative data regarding men’s interpretations of wording used in male sexual aggression assessment and to inform ongoing SES revision efforts.

Findings

Verbal coercion and intoxicant-related items were interpreted as asking about rape. Participants perceived "overwhelming", "pressuring", and "didn't want to" as indicating physically aggressive tactics by perpetrator and continual overt verbal/physical refusal by victim. Items were interpreted as describing strangers or casual acquaintances. Suggestions for item revisions included increasing number of coercive tactics measured and number of intoxicant-related items to specify perpetrator’s intent, victim’s level of intoxication, mode of administration, and whether drugs or alcohol were administered.

METHODS

Six focus group sessions composed of a male psychology graduate student facilitator and five to nine participants were conducted in a university psychological services clinic.

Participants included 37 male undergraduate students (Mean age: 18.76; 92% Caucasian, 8% African American) enrolled in psychology classes. Participants received research or extra credit for participation. Participants were asked not to discuss personal sexual experiences.

Sessions followed a scripted format developed to elicit discussion on participants’ interpretations of three SES items (i.e., unwanted sexual contact, sexual coercion, and intoxicant-related rape). Items were presented one at a time, followed by open ended questions including: “What is this item asking about”, “Describe some hypothetical examples of what this act would look like”. Attention was drawn to the phrases, “When she didn’t want to”, “Overwhelming her with continual arguments and pressure”, and “Sexual intercourse”. Participants were asked to discuss their interpretations of the phrases and provide suggestions on how to reword items for clarity.

Sessions were audio and video taped. All sessions were double transcribed for content accuracy. Final transcripts were reviewed by two separate coders to identify common themes using a Grounded Theory approach. No coder disagreement emerged regarding major themes extracted.

FINDINGS

Unwanted Sexual Contact

Q: Have you fondled, kissed, or touched a woman sexually when she didn’t want to by overwhelming her with continual arguments and pressure?

Interpretations: Aggressive, Manipulated and Pressured Contact

“He’s not trying to convince her in any kind of benign way, he’s not really trying to get her to want to do it, it’s more an agreement to it so he can please himself, aggressively and imposingly as opposed to...more subversive manipulations, more an aggressive stance”...“She felt so pressured she felt she had to do it”...“Have you ever forced yourself on someone”...“I think the word ‘pressure’ is kind of vague...are we talking physical pressure?”

Specific Coercive Tactics: Guilt, Threatening Relationship, Criticizing, Excessive Verbal Pressure

“Telling her that you are the only guy that she could get”...“Not letting up until she buckles, until she breaks” “Manipulating her, trying to talk her into it”...“Until she buckles from the pressure”...“Saying, ‘it’s about time’”...“Guilt trip...telling her this and that hoping she would eventually give up and just do it”...“Continually talking...till she gives in, gives up”...“If you loved me you would do it”

Sexual Coercion

Q: Have you engaged in sexual intercourse with a woman when she didn’t want to by overwhelming her with continual arguments and pressure?

Interpretations: Sexual Coercion Interpreted as Rape

“It’s asking if you have ever raped a girl”...“Pressuring her, putting your hand over her mouth, mentally convincing her not to say a thing”...“I can really read that to be rape, because when you say continual arguments and pressure”...“Arguing and pressuring seem like force”...“I think we are getting really close to rape”...“If she doesn’t give in then it is definitely rape”...“Overwhelming her could be physically overpowering her”...“Anytime you say ‘no’ it’s rape, in law terms”...“I would never say I did that”

Intoxicant-Related Rape

Q: Have you engaged in sexual intercourse with a woman when she didn’t want to by giving her alcohol or drugs?

Interpretations: Rape

“Maybe someone had sex with a girl who was really drunk and she couldn’t resist”...“Funneling some girl drinks until she gets really, really drunk”...“I could see that he gave her that and she passes out”...“Basically you’re buying her a drink or giving her drugs to have that intent of having sex with her”

Consent, Mode of Administration and Perpetrator Intent Ambiguous

“I don’t think it’s clear...maybe once you gave her alcohol she gave you consent”...“There’s a difference between dropping...a pill in her drink and buying her a glass of wine”...“If she gives consent under alcohol she almost has control, she’s impaired, but drugs she has no choice in the matter”...“I know girls who will like drink alcohol just to have this experience”...“If you keep giving her excessive amounts of drinks and she keeps drinking, that is kind of voluntary...but if you drug her, that’s completely involuntary”...“I think it’s a judgment call, but if the girl can talk and she can walk...even though I think she’s drunk, then I think it’s OK”...“People get drunk and do stupid stuff all the time and regret it the next day”...“It could be like buying a girl a drink...and then later on, she’s like really nice or something”

Overt Verbal or Physical Refusal by Victim

“By slapping his hand or saying stop”...“Slap him”...“Saying no”...“Trying to leave”...“Raising her voice”...“She kinda says, ‘Whoa’ or gives him a little push or shoves him away”...“She’d probably be crying”...“Tell you back off”...“She’s getting pissed”...“The girl’s getting mad”...“Recoiling”...“Get the hell away from me”

Items Depict Overt Verbal or Physical Refusal by Victim

“This is just some random creepy guy... some drunk guy who’s like creeping girls out, following them around”...“Might be at a club or something, and see the girl that he might want to do something with her”...“If you’ve been dating a while and you have continual arguments about wanting to advance sexually, there’s something wrong with that”...“They shouldn’t be together if there are continual arguments about fondling and kissing and stuff”...“Funneling some girl drinks”

LIMITATIONS

The generalizability of these findings to other university and community settings and ethnically diverse populations is unknown. Replication with a more substantial sample size and racially / ethnically diverse population would lend support to these findings.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Men interpreted SES items as describing stereotypical forms of sexual assault involving strangers, physical aggression, and overt physical and/or verbal victim resistance. Thus, items may not elicit endorsement by respondents who:

- Engage in other forms of sexually coercive behavior
- Engage in these behaviors within the context of a dating relationship
- Do not encounter the most explicit forms of victim refusal
- View their previous sexual experiences as consensual

Current survey wording may fail to provide adequate memory cues for experiences falling outside narrow views of rape and other forms of sexual misconduct, thus lending support to the argument for an underreporting bias among male perpetrators.

Item interpretations and revision suggestions provided by participants support the following survey revisions proposed by the SES Collaborative:

- Separating aggressive and nonaggressive forms of sexually coercive tactics
- Increasing the number of intoxicant-related items and sexually coercive tactics
- Replacing the phrases “when she didn’t want to” and “sexual intercourse” with more behaviorally specific language
- Revisions specifying victim refusal strategies in behavioral terms may provide additional memory cues to respondents and increase disclosure

Additional research examining the ability of the SES to assess sexual perpetration is encouraged. Disclosure rate comparisons across various versions and formats would provide much needed validity data. Better understanding perpetrator disclosure and perceptions of engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior will lead to more accurate prevalence estimates and ultimately inform prevention efforts.