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The Relationship Between the Sexual Assault Item Endorsed and Detailed Descriptions of What Occurred: How Closely Do They Correspond in a Community Sample?



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Participants' responses to the 10-item Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987) are typically coded so that they fall into one of five mutually exclusive groups based on the worst type of sexual assault endorsed: no assault, sexual contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape, and rape. Although this measure has good reliability and validity, some researchers have suggested that participants' responses to these brief items may not always accurately describe their experiences (Fisher & Cullen, 2000; Testa et al., 2004). This presentation reports on a study in which men's responses to the SES were compared to their descriptions of the event in a series of detailed follow-up questions. Participants were 163 single men from a large metropolitan area in the United States who completed computer-assisted self-interviews. Participants completed the SES in terms of acts they had perpetrated on a woman since the age of 14. They then answered a series of follow-up questions regarding a SES question they endorsed or about their worst date, if they did not endorse any SES items. Based on the SES, 36% of the men described a worst date, 28% a forced contact, 24% a verbal coercion, 2% an attempted rape, and 10% a completed rape. Based on the detailed follow-up questions, three men who described worst dates were recategorized as committing some type of forced sex (one forced contact, one sexual coercion, and one rape). Four men who were coded as forced contacters and three men who were coded as verbal coercers appeared to commit a more serious event than the SES item implied. It is not surprising that a single brief item does not fully convey all the aspects involved in a forced sexual experience. These findings suggest that asking follow-up questions may provide men with the opportunity to divulge more detailed information about what occurred.

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