

UNDERREPORTING OF HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC PLACES

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Introduction

Survey research has been used to document the level of harassment of women in their homes, in public places, at work, and in educational institutions. Government investigations, such as the United States House of Representatives, have considered survey evidence when investigating the extent to which women at work are targets of harassment. The use of surveys to explore sensitive topics, and the use of surveys to understand women's issues in general, has been criticized on theoretical and ethical grounds. In addition, there has been debate as to which mode of data collection should be used in collecting information about sexual harassment of women. However, little systematic evidence has been collected to determine the extent to which the survey process impacts on reporting of harassment. We do not know, for example, if the respondent's view of the interviewer, or if the presence of other people in the household, affect the likelihood that a women will report abuse. Finally, we do not know if women, on reflection of the completed interview, will report additional harassment if interviewed a second time.

Some preliminary insights into the extent to which the survey process itself results in underreporting of harassment in public places is documented in this paper. The information presented was collected by re-interviewing women who completed a survey on sexual harassment in public places and at work and asking them about the interview.

Study Description

The Survey on Sexual Harassment in Public Places and at Work was completed by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at York University in Toronto between April and August 1992. Approximately 2,000 thirty minute telephone interviews were completed with women who either were currently working, or had worked in the past year for pay, in a job that was outside of their home.

Although the Institute had successfully completed two smaller surveys on violence against women, there was concern about the extent to which women would report

sexual harassment in public places and at work to an interviewer over the telephone. From the outset of the survey we were cognizant that previous research found that respondents' answers could be influenced by the sex of the interviewer (Northrup, 1994; Kane and MaCaulay, 1993; and Groves and Fultz, 1985), and that respondents' perception of interviewers were correlated with interviewer response rates (Oksenberg, Coleman and Cannell, 1986). As a result, we were concerned that the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent could affect reporting. Our expectation was that the building of rapport between the respondent and the interviewer might make it easier for women to report harassment. Because the data were being collected via the telephone, personality cues in the interviewer's voice and demeanour would likely be critical to the establishment of rapport.

As a result of these concerns we took two steps: the first was designed to be preventive, the second to be informative. The preventive step included modifications to the way in which interviewers were selected, trained, and supervised on an ongoing basis during the survey. The informative step was to re-interview almost 300 of the women who completed the survey.

The Informative Step: The Re-interview Survey

The re-interviews were completed with a random sample of almost 300 of the respondents who completed the national survey of Sexual Harassment in Public Places and at Work. The re-interviews were completed the day after the national interview was completed by either the telephone lab supervisors (two) or senior interviewers (two).

Before reviewing the results of the re-interviews it is important to note, in terms of the questions of interest, that the re-interview sample is a good representation of the national survey sample. As indicated in Table 1, the proportion of women reporting harassment in the re-interview survey is a close match to the national survey. The largest difference between the two samples is three percent: in the re-interview sample, three percent fewer women reported that 'a man had indecently exposed himself;' but three percent more women reported that a man had 'touched or tried to touch them in a sexual way.' For the remaining four items there was either no difference or a difference of only one percent.

TABLE 1 REPORTING OF HARASSMENT: NATIONAL AND RE-INTERVIEW SURVEYS

Item	National Survey	Re-Interview Survey
A man shouted unwanted sexual comments	69	64
A man stared at you	80	76
A man indecently exposed himself to you	26	22
A man followed you on foot or in a vehicle	54	54
A man touched or tried to touch you in a sexual way	39	35
Ever received any other unwanted attention in a public place since you were 16 years of age	22	20
Minimum Number of Cases	1,990	289

The re-interview sample also closely matches the national sample with respect to sociodemographic characteristics. There are only small differences between the two groups with respect to employment and marital status, family income, educational achievement, age and place of residence. On the basis of both sociodemographic profile and reporting of harassment, there is no evidence to suggest the women who participated in the re-interview sample are not representative of the women who participated in the national survey.

The re-interview was designed to provide information on three issues: first, the extent to which women would report sexual harassment in the re-interview that they **did not** report in the first interview; second, to determine if rates of reporting sexual harassment were influenced by third party effects; and third to see if there was a relationship between the respondent's evaluation of the interviewer and the amount of harassment reported.

Additional Reporting of Harassment in the Re-interview

Slightly more than one in every ten women in the re-interview answered affirmatively when asked "have you thought of any experiences you have had with sexual harassment in public places or at work that you **did not tell us about** yesterday?" (emphasis added). The eleven percent of the women who responded affirmatively to the item were asked to describe the harassment. However, almost all of the additional response was not evidence of underreporting in the national survey. Approximately equal numbers of women provided one of the four following types of answers to the follow-up

question asking them to describe this harassment. Some women reported harassment, such as incest or abuse by spouses that was not asked about in the survey. Others talked about how they felt about harassment and the steps they thought needed to be taken to deal with harassment. Others provided information about a friend who had been harassed. Finally, some women provided additional information about harassment that they had reported in the national survey. Only about one in ten of the eleven percent of the respondents who answered the re-interview question affirmatively (or about one percent of **all** of the women who completed the re-interview) provided information about harassment in public places or work that was not reported in the national interview. No evidence was found to suggest that asking women a second time about harassment one day after a previous interview, will have any impact on the levels of harassment reported.

(Of course, this does not suggest that women report all incidents of harassment in telephone surveys. It only indicates that, in this single test, asking about harassment a first time does not prompt additional reporting in a second interview, when the second interview is completed within a day or two of the first.)

Third Party Effects and Reporting of Harassment

The literature suggests that third party effects are, in general, limited. Effects are only large when a respondent is answering questions about sensitive topics, such as sexual behaviour, in front of their children or when the respondent's answer to a question will provide new information to other adults who are present. Researchers have hypothesized that third party

TABLE 2 REPORTING OF HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC PLACES: WITH AND WITHOUT ANOTHER PERSON PRESENT DURING INTERVIEW

Item	Percent Harassed Since 16 Years of Age	
	No one present during interview	Someone else present during interview
A man shouted unwanted sexual comments	69	64
A man stared at you	80	76
A man indecently exposed himself to you	26	22
A man followed you on foot or in a vehicle	54	54
A man touched or tried to touch you in a sexual way	39	35
Ever received any other unwanted attention in a public place since you were 16 years of age	22	20
Minimum Number of Cases	77	193

effects would be reduced in a telephone interview, as the third party can only hear one side of the conversation (Bradburn, Sudman and Associates, 1979). This should especially be the case with closed ended items when the respondent has to provide only simple answers, like "yes" or "no."

Twenty-eight percent of the respondents reported that someone "listened or might have listened .. when [they] talked with our interviewer" (Table 2). The proportion of respondents reporting the presence of a third party is close to estimates of the proportion of face-to-face interviews conducted when a third party is present (Bradburn, Sudman and Associates, 1979). In about half of the cases the "someone" was a spouse or partner, with children (25 percent) or other people (24 percent) accounted for the remaining half of the cases. When asked how the presence of the other person effected their answers about 70 percent gave responses that could be summarized as "they felt constrained" in how they answered the questions.

By comparing the proportion of women reporting harassment in public places, according to whether or not someone might have listened to their responses, we can see small difference in the direction of a decrease in reporting when someone else was present during the interview for three of the six items (Table 2). In these items (unwanted sexual comments, indecent exposure, and other unwanted attention), women who completed the interview in the presence of others were between three and eight percent less likely to report harassment. There was either no difference or a one percent increase

or decrease in reporting on the other two items. Although the number of cases is very small, when we compare the likelihood of reporting for those who said the presence of others during the interview made them constrained in how they answered, the difference is somewhat larger than those reported in Table 2, but still not at a level of statistical significance.

Interviewer Effects and Reporting of Harassment

Respondents were asked a number of questions in the re-interview that were designed to evaluate the interviewer. In general, and not surprisingly, respondents were mainly positive in their comments about the interviewers. Other researchers (Fowler and Mangione, 1990) also report that respondents are quite positive in describing the interviewer in re-interviews. Using a five point scale, respondents were asked to rate the interviewers on eight different dimensions (how good a job the interviewer did, how friendly, comfortable, pleasant, confident, sympathetic, sensitive, and interested the interviewer was in what you [the respondent] said).

Using the eight interviewer ratings, as well responses to two open ended questions (how would you describe the interviewer and what did you like least about the interview), each interviewer was classified, **for each interview they completed**, on the basis of the information collected in the re-interview. If the respondent gave one or no negative ratings (on the ratings or in the open ends), the interviewer was classified as good (for that specific

interviewer/respondent interaction). If the respondent gave the interview five or more negative mentions the interviewer was classified as poor (for that specific interviewer/respondent interaction). The remaining interviewer situations were classified as average. On the basis of this information, the interviewers were classified as average in about two thirds of the interviews. They were classified as good (16 percent), or poor (20 percent) the rest of the time.

There was some consistency in how interviewers were rated by respondents. However, the relationship was far from perfect. When looking at respondent/interviewer interactions on a case by case basis, there were clear variations, sometimes of considerable magnitude. One respondent would have only praise for the interviewer and the next would make several negative comments about the interviewer. This is not surprising - the interviewer is only one component of the interaction. An interviewing style that one respondent considers evidence of professional confidence may be seen as pushy and arrogant by another respondent. An interviewer who repeats an answer in an inquiring tone can be viewed as encouraging by one respondent but as "slow to catch on" by another respondent.

The relationship between respondents' ratings of the interviewer, as reported in the re-interview, and the likelihood of reporting harassment is depicted in Table 3. Note that the Table does not provide an average rating for each interviewer, rather each interaction between the respondent and the interviewer is counted separately. As is readily apparent, the highest reporting of harassment occurs when the interviewer is classified as good. In these cases, the incidence of reported harassment is between 10 and 24 percent higher on the six items than that reported when the interviewer was rated as poor. Even given the small sample size, the differences are statistically significant in two of the six items.

The pattern in the table is almost uniform, in that the highest reporting always occurs when the respondents rated the interviewers as good, and with one exception (the item about being followed), the lowest reporting is always when the interviewer was rated as poor. In five of the six items, when the interviewers was classified as average, they obtained incidence rates between those obtained when the interviewer was rated as good or poor.

It is not possible to know whether the higher, or lower, incidence of reporting is most valid. At least three arguments can be advanced for suggesting that the

higher rates are inflated. First, it is possible that interviewers, when they felt they had established good rapport with respondents, were directive rather than neutral in answering respondents' questions and in probing unclear responses. They may have felt they were doing their tasks well if they were getting a high level of reporting to the harassment questions.

Second, it is possible that respondents, feeling comfortable with the interviewer, wanted to answer the questions in the way they thought most satisfactory to the interviewer - that is to report harassment. Most respondents probably, and correctly, viewed the purpose of the research as an attempt to collect information about harassment. The structure of the questionnaire would encourage this interpretation. When a women reported harassment they were asked for additional information about the circumstances. There has been extensive review of tendency for subjects in experiments **to adopt the role of a good subject** and complete tasks or provide answers that they think match the researchers' needs, demands and expectations (see Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1984, for a review of artifacts in psychological research).

The third argument for interpreting the higher levels of reporting with caution, is intertwined with the second argument. Research has found that interviewer's expectations of the respondent are associated with the answers they receive from the respondent (this concept is analogous to the experimenter effects documented in psychological research). Interviewers who, prior to the start of a survey, express concern about the sensitive nature of questions tend to get both higher item nonresponse and lower estimates of sensitive behaviour (Singer and Kohnke-Aguirre, 1979 and Singer, Frankel, and Glassman, 1983). Interviewers who expected women to report harassment may have communicated understanding rather than uncertainty about how to proceed when a women was contemplating reporting harassment.

It is difficult to find evidence to support any of these three arguments and there is reason to discount the first two. Approximately 15 percent of all of the interviewing was monitored by a supervisor. When monitoring an interview (or part of an interview - supervisors tend to move between interviews so as to more frequently listen to difficult or more sensitive parts of the questionnaire) the supervisor can both listen to the interviewer/respondent interaction and watch how the interviewer records the respondents' answers. Supervisors did report differences in how neutral interviewers were in probing responses and providing

TABLE 3 REPORTING OF HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC PLACES: BY INTERVIEWER CLASSIFICATION

Item	Interviewer Classification		
	Good	Average	Poor
A man shouted unwanted sexual comments	70	68	57
A man stared at you*	85	81	68
A man indecently exposed himself to you	33	25	20
A man followed you on foot or in a vehicle	63	48	51
A man touched or tried to touch you in a sexual way*	53	34	29
Ever received any other unwanted attention in a public place since you were 16 years of age	30	20	18
Number of Cases	40	158	51

*significant at 0.05

additional information to respondents. However, with one exception, supervisors found no evidence that interviewers were directive in way in which they interacted with respondents. The evidence from the monitoring process weakens the first argument for rejecting the higher reporting levels. There is no evidence from the monitoring that interviewers were selectively directive rather than neutral in answering respondents' questions and in probing unclear responses.

For the second argument to be persuasive we must allow for the possibility that women, in response to the demands of the survey, adopted a role where they felt they should reported harassment even if it had not happened. The possibility of reporting harassment that did not exist seems remote. Because the questionnaire included a pattern where an affirmative answer usually resulted in additional follow-up questions, a women would have to provide context for an incident that did not happen. To construct such a reality in the course of questions and answers during a telephone interview would be difficult and go beyond a respondent adopting the role of a good subject.

It is possible that respondents may have saw events from a different perspective as a result of the interview. The meaning of survey questions can be established as a result of the interview and, in the same way, a respondent can define a past event in response to survey questions. Assume rapport between the respondent and the interviewer is high. If the interviewer seems to expect reporting and the women wants to help with the

research it is possible that she may see the past event in a way that encourages to answer some of the harassment items affirmatively. But if rapport between the respondent and the interviewer is low, the same woman may be reluctant to answer affirmatively. She may not think the interview wants to hear about the event and she may be less interested in playing the role of a good subject because she is uncomfortable in the interview situation. The event itself has not changed, the way in which it is viewed may differ on the basis of the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. Note, however, that this argument cuts both ways. Just as it is possible that the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent may encourage a women to define past events in a way that encourages an affirmative answer we can see the possibility that a woman may provide a negative answer as a result of the interviewer-respondent interaction. If this is an argument for being cautious with the higher reporting when interviewer respondent rapport is high, it is also a reason to be cautious with the lower reporting when rapport is low.

There is also at least one argument to suggest that the higher rates are more valid. There is good reason to think that reporting of harassment to an interviewer, who is after all an unseen stranger may, for some women, be difficult. It is reasonable to assume that the decision to report harassment is easier when a woman feels comfortable with the interviewer.

There is considerable research on how survey respondents overreport socially acceptable behaviours and underreport socially unacceptable behaviour (see Bradburn, Sudman and Associates, 1979 examination of social desirability and different data collection modes and more recently Dovidio and Fazio, 1992, who consider the interviewer/respondent interaction and social desirability). Generally this research shows that high interviewer/respondent rapport increases reporting on socially sensitive issues. The decision, about whether or not to report harassment in a telephone survey, is very likely to be easier when a woman feels comfortable with the interviewer.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A number of steps were taken with respect to the selection, training, and supervision of interviewers in the Survey of Sexual Harassment in Public Places and at Work. However, information obtained from re-interviewing a sample of the women who completed the national survey suggests that the reporting is likely to be lower than actually experienced by women. Two factors are critical. One, a number of the women reported that they completed the main survey in the presence of others and these women consistently reported slightly lower levels of harassment. Two, when the interviewer is judged positively by the respondent the incidence rates reported are higher than when the respondent/interviewer interaction is rated less positively.

At a minimum, researchers working in the area of harassment need to ask about the presence of others during the interview and include this information as a variable in the data set. Better still, interviewers need to be provided with strategies to assist them in completing the interview at a time when the respondent is confident that a third party cannot hear their responses.

Interviewer variation in reporting rates suggests that careful attention needs to be given to the development of skills that maximize the interviewers' ability to establish rapport with as wide a range of respondents as possible. Of course, the need to hire and train the best interviewers is a constant recommendation in the survey research community. The need for the best possible interviewers is important enough for researchers to consider trading off sample size, or questionnaire length, so that they can allocate a more reasonable proportion of their resources to hiring and training the best interviewers.

The re-interview sample included only 300 of the 2,000

women who completed the main survey. Given the small number of cases, the results deserve to be viewed with caution. However, given the importance of sexual harassment it is critical for survey researchers to further explore the relationship between the interviewer, the interview situation and the results of the survey.

A reasonable conclusion from the data collected in the re-interview is that surveys on harassment will provide estimates that underreport the level of harassment unless the very best interviewers are used.

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