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Upset among youth in response to questions about exposure to violence, sexual assault and family maltreatment☆

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ABSTRACT

To assess whether youth are upset by being asked questions about sensitive kinds of abuse, victimization, family maltreatment, and sexual victimization in the course of standard epidemiological surveys. A national sample of youth aged 10–17 were interviewed on the telephone by experienced interviewers as part of the National Survey of Children Exposed to Violence. At the end they were asked whether answering questions had upset them. Of the youth interviewed, 4.5% reported being at all upset and 0.8% reported being *pretty* or *a lot* upset. However, only a minority of those upset, .3% of the total sample, said they would not participate again had they known about the content. But even in this group, the regret about participation was mostly due to the length of the survey, not the types of questions being asked. Thus, asking about exposure to abuse and sensitive kinds of victimization in standard interview surveys is associated with low levels of respondent upset due to the nature of the questions.

When epidemiologic studies ask youth questions about their exposure to abuse, violence, and sex offenses, researchers and Human Subject Review Board members regularly worry about the potential for harm (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2007). There are two related concerns. One is that the youth will be reminded by the questions of upsetting or traumatic life events and will be overwhelmed with the emotions or conflicts that the memories provoke. The second is the possibility that the survey subject matter will be troubling to a sensitive youth or will broach issues that they are not developmentally prepared for, particularly concerning sex or sexual violence.

A considerable body of research on adults has found in general that asking about trauma and sensitive topics rarely provokes lasting serious distress and is mostly seen by participants as having benefits that outweigh any negatives (Edwards, Kearns, Calhoun, & Gidycz, 2009; Jorm, Kelly, & Morgan, 2007; Newman & Kaloupek, 2004; Savell, Kinder, & Young, 2006; Widom & Czaja, 2006).

However, these findings are not typically seen as applying to youth. In a recent review, a team connected with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) voiced a strong concern:

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> *Until there is further empirical evidence to extend understanding of the potential risks to children and young people, the relatively high number of children reporting upset (between one-quarter and one-third of participants in some studies) suggests the need for caution and for careful consideration of methodological choices to help ameliorate distress.* (Child Protection Monitoring & Evaluation Reference Group, 2012)

But the UNICEF review appeared to be based on a somewhat selective reading of the available research, as it cited only two studies with apparent high reported distress levels (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Arata, O'Brien, Bowers, & Klibert, 2006; Ybarra, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Friend, & Diener-West, 2009). These studies are not representative of the full literature.

For example, Zajac, Ruggiero, Smith, Saunders, and Kilpatrick (2011) reported that only 5.7% of a national sample of 3614 adolescents 12–17 found some questions distressing after a telephone interview that included items about sexual abuse, physical abuse and assault, witnessing parental violence, a variety of other stressful life events, and an inventory of lifetime mental health symptoms.

A similar rate of distress (7.9%) was found in a large household survey of 2275 adolescents aged 11–17 who were asked about a wide range of physical and sexual victimizations in a computer assisted format in the United Kingdom (Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher, 2013). The rate of distress among youth was barely different from the rate reported by parent interviewees about the same topics (7.4%). Moreover, 95% of the distressed children said that participation in the survey had nonetheless been worthwhile.

Various reviewers have pointed out that the distress reported by participants is often minor and needs to be assessed in the context of other attitudes toward participation. It is interesting that one of the studies cited in the UNICEF report (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2006) actually had a different conclusion from the same data because the authors emphasized only the *often* upset group (not the r*arely*, or *sometimes* upset group), which was only 2.5–7.6% of the sample. They concluded, "Overall, youth generally reported little distress from completing this self-report survey. . .."

We had the opportunity to contribute to this issue in large national survey asking children about victimization and a variety of other sensitive questions.

Methods

Participants

The respondents in this study come from the youth interview portion of the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence II (NatSCEV II), designed to obtain up-to-date incidence and prevalence estimates of a wide range of childhood victimizations. The full sample consisted of a national survey of 4503 children and youth ages one month to 17 years of age in 2011. The current analyses focus on the subset of respondents age 10–17. Study interviews were conducted over the phone by the employees of an experienced survey research firm. The cooperation and response rates averaged across collection modalities were 52.7% and 40.4%, respectively (for more details on sample selection, see Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2013).

Procedure

A short interview was conducted with an adult caregiver (usually a parent) to obtain family demographic information. One child was then randomly selected from all eligible children living in a household by selecting the child with the most recent birthday. If the selected child was 10–17 years old, the main telephone interview was conducted with the child. This group of 2312 youth made up the sample for the present analysis.

Respondents were promised complete confidentiality, and were paid $20 for their participation. The interviews, averaging 55 min in length, were conducted in either English or Spanish. Respondents who disclosed a situation of serious threat or ongoing victimization were re-contacted by a clinical member of the research team, trained in telephone crisis counseling, whose responsibility was to stay in contact with the respondent until the situation was appropriately addressed locally. All procedures were authorized by the Institutional Review Board of the University of New Hampshire. More details on the design are available in Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, and Hamby (2013).

Measurement

Victimization. This survey utilized an enhanced version of the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ), an inventory of 54 childhood victimizations, including questions on respondents' experience of conventional crime, physical assault, maltreatment, peer victimization, sexual victimization, and witnessing violence in the home and community (Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005a; Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005b; Hamby, Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2004). In addition, there were 15 questions about whether youth had engaged in specific delinquent behaviors (Loeber & Dishion, 1983).

The assessment of discomfort in taking the survey was made near the conclusion of the survey as part of a general set of debriefing questions, starting with: "How important do you think it is to participate in research like this to help other