



Does it matter how you ask? Question wording and males' reporting of contraceptive use at last sex

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 June 2011

Revised 30 March 2012

Accepted 2 April 2012

Available online 16 April 2012

Keywords:

Contraception

Men

Survey methodology

Questionnaire design

ABSTRACT

This paper reports results from a unique experiment conducted in the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) to gauge the effect of question format on men's reports of contraceptive use at last sexual intercourse. Respondents received separate questions about their own and their partners' contraceptive use or one combined question about either partner's contraceptive use. We examine whether receiving separate questions, as opposed to one combined question, is related to higher reports of using any contraceptive method, specific methods, female methods in addition to male methods, and the number of methods reported. We find that reports of any contraceptive use at last sex and use of the most common methods, condoms and the pill, were stable across question formats. However, we find significantly higher reports of withdrawal, combining male and female methods, and multiple method use among men who received the separate-question format. We also find that characteristics of the sexual experience in question condition the effect of question format on men's reports.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have increasingly acknowledged the importance of including men in studies of contraceptive behavior (Edwards, 1994; Forste, 2002; Gillmore et al., 2003; Landry and Camelo, 1994). However, studies that ask men to report on contraceptive methods may suffer from greater reporting error than similar studies of women. Men often lack direct knowledge of their partners' contraceptive use, relying instead on being told or seeing physical evidence of a method, such as a pill pack. Research has found that such "proxy reporting," or reporting on another's behavior, is more susceptible to measurement error (Moore, 1988; Sudman et al., 1996; Todorov, 2003).

Survey researchers may be able to reduce measurement error in men's reports of contraceptive use with careful selection of question wording and format. Current large-scale surveys have varied in how they ask questions about contraceptive use. For example, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), and Cycles 1–5 of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) asked a single question about the contraceptive methods a couple uses, while the National Survey of Adolescent Males (NSAMs) asked separate questions about the respondent's and his partner's method. Studies have shown that variation in question format and wording may contribute to differences in estimates of method use (Catania et al., 1990; Santelli et al., 2000). This paper reports findings from an experiment on question format to help us understand whether and, if so, how these differences in question wording and format influence men's reports of contraceptive use.

Evidence from survey research suggests that a separate-question format may help address the concern that men mis- or under-report their contraceptive method use. For example, asking multiple questions and focusing the second question on

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less memorable information aids recall (Belli, 1998; Brown, 1990; Cannell et al., 1977; Fowler and Cosenza, 2008; Sudman and Bradburn, 1982). Information about one's own behavior tends to be more memorable and readily recallable than someone else's, so asking men a second, separate question about their partners' use of contraception may lend itself to better recall (Fowler and Cosenza, 2008; Tourangeau et al., 2000). The separate-question format also takes longer to administer, which essentially would allow men more time to recall information about the methods they or their partner used (Burton and Blair, 1991; Marquis et al., 1972; Tourangeau and Smith, 1996).

Another way in which the separate-question format may help address concerns about men misreporting contraceptive use is by emphasizing the importance of reporting *all* methods used, not just the most common methods or male methods. Asking separate questions may better convey to the respondent that the interviewer wants greater completeness and precision in contraceptive use reporting than a single question implies (Fowler and Cosenza, 2008; Loftus et al., 1990; Singer et al., 2010). Motivating respondents to be complete in their responses can be critical for producing accurate information (Fowler and Cosenza, 2008; Groves et al., 2004; Krosnick, 1991a,b, 1999). A question specifically about their partners' method use, and the accompanying follow-up prompts, may motivate men to provide a more thoughtful or thorough answer to the larger question of what method of contraception was used during their last sexual intercourse. Last, in the separate-question format each question has fewer response options than in the combined-question format, which should be easier for respondents to read and process (Bishop and Smith, 2001; Holbrook et al., 2006, 2007).

The NSFG, the largest national study of contraceptive use, provides an important resource for understanding the impact of question wording and format on men's contraceptive reporting. In 2002, the NSFG included a split-sample experiment to allow analysis of how a single- or separate-question format affects men's contraceptive reporting. Some male respondents were randomly chosen to receive a single, combined question, while others received separate questions about their own and their partner's contraceptive use. This paper analyzes the results of the experiment, examining how men's reports of contraceptive use vary between the single- and separate-question groups.

The lack of an objective truth against which to measure estimates of contraceptive use precludes evaluation of which question format yields the more accurate report. Rather, we investigate the degree to which men's reporting of contraceptive use is sensitive to question format. We hypothesize that the separate-question format will be positively associated with reports of any method use, each specific method use, using female methods rather than only male methods or no method, and the number of methods reported.

Additionally, we test for interactions between question format and characteristics of the last sexual experience. It is important for researchers who are collecting or analyzing data on men's contraceptive use to understand how the effect of question format may vary across subgroups. Failing to recognize subgroup differences in sensitivity to question format may lead to inaccurate conclusions regarding subgroup differences in contraceptive use (Ayhan and Isksal, 2004; Catania et al., 1996; Holbrook et al., 2007).

In particular, we expect that the effect of question format may depend on the specifics of the sexual encounter in question. Recent events tend to be easier to recall (Rubin and Wetzel, 1996; Stocké and Stark, 2007; Wu et al., 2001), so we expect that men whose last sexual experience occurred recently will be less sensitive to the question format.

Also, previous research has shown that the relationship between two sexual partners may influence both their contraceptive use (Manlove and Terry-Humen 2007; Manning et al., 2000; Santelli et al., 1996) and men's knowledge and reports of the methods used (Moore, 1988; Sudman et al., 1996). Of importance for this research, whether a couple resides together may exert a unique impact on men's contraceptive reporting (Grady et al., 1996; Bachrach 1987). Studies have shown that the difference between partners' contraceptive use reports decreases as the level of couple interaction increases (Menon et al., 1995; Koenig et al., 1984) and men who share living space with their partners are much more likely to have firsthand knowledge of their female partners' use of non-coitally specific methods. Thus, we expect that men who are married or cohabiting with their partner will be less sensitive to question format than men who were not living with their last sexual partner.

2. Data and methods

We use data from Cycle 6, the 2002 round of the NSFG, which included 4928 completed interviews of men 15–44 years of age and an overall male response rate of 78%. For a detailed discussion of sampling procedures and study design see Groves et al. (2005) and Lepkowski et al. (2006). We analyze data from the 4109 men who reported having had sexual intercourse with opposite-sex partners.

2.1. Measure of question format

Respondents were randomly assigned to receive either the combined-question or separate-question format. For each format, Fig. 1 shows reproductions of the exact question wording, categories of contraceptives, and the cards shown to the respondents. We used a dichotomous measure for question format, coded 1 for the separate-question format (70%, by design) and 0 otherwise.¹

¹ Prior to the beginning of the interview, a respondent was randomly assigned by the computerized questionnaire program to one or the other question format, with a 70% probability of being in the separate-questions group. The design assigned more respondents to this group to allow for more stable statistics since this question format was the same as used in the NSAM, and the NSFG was charged with extending the NSAM's time series.

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