

Effects of Interviewer Age on Reporting of Sexual and Reproductive Behavior of Hispanic and African American Youth

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The purpose of this article is to evaluate the effects of interviewer age on the reporting of personal behaviors including sexual experience, abortion, live births, and condom use. Data were drawn from a household probability sample of 1,435 urban, low-income, African American and Hispanic youths 15 to 24 years of age conducted in 1991. The results indicate that interviewer age does play a role in the reporting of sensitive behaviors, although the effects were not uniform for gender and ethnic groups. The strongest effects were observed for Hispanic women who reported more sexual activity to younger interviewers. Implications for making comparisons of sexual risk behaviors between ethnic groups with sample survey data are discussed.

Although several reviews of methodological issues in survey research on sensitive topics such as sexual behavior are available (Abramson & Herdt, 1990; Catania, Gibson, & Marin, 1990), issues specific to low-income, minority populations have not been as widely discussed in the literature (Ford & Norris, 1991). Research is needed on appropriate methods for collecting data on sexual behavior from these populations. The purpose of this article is to evaluate the effects of interviewer age on the reporting of personal behaviors including sexual experience, pregnancy, and condom use in different ethnic and gender subgroups.

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Although interviewer age has been considered in a few studies (Berk & Bernstein, 1988), it has not been evaluated in studies of sensitive behaviors. Difference in age between interviewer and respondent may influence reporting of sexual behavior due to impression management concerns. That is, the respondent may be concerned that to report engaging in specific behaviors will create a bad impression because some behaviors may be seen as more or less socially desirable. An older interviewer may increase the salience of normative standards and thus influence social desirability, resulting in an underreporting on sexual behaviors.

These issues must be considered in sexuality research on persons currently at risk for HIV infection: members of low-income, urban, minority populations. Ethnicity may influence respondents' feelings about and willingness to answer certain questions (Mays & Jackson, 1991). For example, many Hispanic persons view sexual activity as more private than Anglos (Marin, Marin, & Juarez, 1988). In many traditional Hispanic and African American families, talking about sex is taboo (Jimenez, 1987). Sexuality may be a particularly sensitive topic for young Hispanic women, because the "good" woman is not supposed to know about sex, and little discussion of sex may take place. A double standard that allows men to have more liberal standards for sexual behavior has also been discussed (Ford & Norris, 1993; Marin et al., 1988; Padilla & O'Grady, 1987).

The hypotheses to be tested in this article based on this literature are all derived from the premise that an older interviewer is likely to increase the salience of normative standards with the result that respondents will construct more socially desirable histories for older interviewers. Hence, it is hypothesized that adolescent and young adult respondents will be more likely to underreport sexual activity, numbers of sexual partners, abortions, and early births to older interviewers. Furthermore, due to the cultural factors discussed above, it is hypothesized that these differences will be larger for young Hispanic women.

Materials and Method

The data for this study were from a household probability sample of African American and Hispanic adolescents and young adults 15 to 24 years of age in Detroit, Michigan. The sample design and the fieldwork were conducted by the Survey Research Center of the Institute for Social Research of the University of Michigan. Study areas were selected by consideration of demographic and socioeconomic household characteristics to include low-income African American and Hispanic populations. The fieldwork period was from February through July 1991. A total of 1,435 interviews were

completed. The response rate for the study averaged 85% (86% for Hispanics). This response rate is the product of the percentage of selected households screened times the proportion of eligible persons who completed the interview. Written consent was obtained from all respondents and from parents of persons younger than 18 years of age. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

The survey interview assessed sexual experience, condom use, and social and demographic characteristics. Both body parts and types of intercourse (penis in vagina, penis in mouth, and penis in anus) were defined during the interview for each respondent. The interviews averaged about 1 hour. Spanish-language questionnaires were used for 108 interviews with Hispanic respondents.

More than 95% of the 60 interviewers who worked on the study were minority residents of Detroit. Interviewer training consisted of two 3-day sessions that included instruction on general interviewing techniques. Training relevant to taking drug and sexual histories included discussion of AIDS, drugs, and sexual practices; a values-clarification exercise; and practice in conducting interviews. Interviews were conducted in respondents' homes when privacy could be assured or in neutral sites when privacy was not available in the home. Interviewer assignment to households was unrelated to age.

Measures of Personal Behaviors

Sexual behavior. The measures included the following items: sexually active in the last year, defined as experiencing any type of penetrative sex in the last year (1 = ever, 0 = never); ever had anal intercourse (1 = ever, 0 = never); and number of partners in the last year.

Condom use. The measure was condom use at last intercourse (1 = used a condom at last intercourse, 0 = did not use a condom at last intercourse).

Experience with pregnancy. Two variables were examined for association with interviewer characteristics: (a) ever had a live birth (1 = had a birth, 0 = did not have a birth) and (b) ever had an abortion (1 = had an abortion, 0 = did not have an abortion).

Measures of Interviewer Characteristics

Age. The interviewers' ages were divided into three groups: (a) 20 to 30 years of age, (b) 31 to 40 years of age, and (c) 41 years of age or older.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Detroit Youth, 1991

	African American ^a %	Hispanic ^b %	Total ^c %
Age			
Mean (in years)	19.0	19.2	19.1
15 to 17	35.8	35.2	35.5
18 to 21	40.3	38.7	39.5
22 to 24	23.9	26.1	25.0
Gender			
Male	37.8	48.1	42.9
Female	62.2	51.9	57.1
Education			
Fewer than 12 years, without GED or diploma	59.1	65.6	62.3
12 or fewer years, with GED or diploma	26.7	23.5	25.1
13+ years	14.2	10.9	12.6
Currently attending school	57.5	48.2	52.9
Dropouts			
Fewer than 12 years, no plans to attend further	4.0	13.7	8.8
Marital status			
Never married	97.1	84.4	90.8
Separated	0.4	2.1	1.2
Divorced	0.6	1.0	0.8
Married	1.9	12.5	7.2
Hispanic origin			
Mexican			
Born in Mexico	—	16.4	—
Born in the United States	—	56.7	—
Puerto Rican			
Born in Puerto Rico	—	7.9	—
Born in the United States	—	15.2	—
Other Hispanic			
Born outside the United States	—	1.8	—
Born in the United States	—	1.3	—

a. $n = 724$.b. $n = 711$.c. $N = 1,435$.

Individual interviewer effects. A variable was created with an indicator for each interviewer so that individual interviewer effects could be controlled in the analysis. Other interviewer characteristics including education, gender, ethnicity, and work experience were examined for influence on reporting behavior, but their influence was minimal and they are not included in these analyses.

Measures of Respondent Characteristics

Measures of respondent characteristics were included in the analysis to eliminate any confounding of relationships between the interviewer characteristics and the reporting of personal behaviors that could be due to an association between respondent characteristics and interviewer characteristics.

Age. Age was coded as years of age.

Education. Education was coded as years of schooling.

Statistical Methods

Following the methodology of Kane and Macula (1995), we conducted multivariate analyses of variance that allowed us to represent respondent and interviewer level effects and to test these effects net of the effects of other respondent factors. The analyses treat interviewer age and individual interviewer effects (nested within interviewer age) as factors and controls for respondent age and education. Individual interviewer effects are nested within rather than crossed with interviewer age because each interviewer's age is fixed. This procedure also allows us to acknowledge the clustering of observations by interviewer by providing the appropriate error terms for testing both respondent level and interviewer level effects. Groves (1989) criticized much research on interviewer effects for ignoring this clustering of observations.

Results are presented in tables showing the mean for each dependent variable by interviewer's age. In addition, *F* values are shown to test for the significance of interviewer age effects net of the effects of other factors. The *F* tests for interviewer age effects were conducted by dividing the mean square for interviewer age by the mean square for individual interviewer effects nested within interviewer age. Full details of the models are available from the authors.

Results

Table 2 shows the results of the analyses for Hispanic women. Interviewer's age was strongly related to reporting of sexual activity. Young Hispanic women were significantly more likely to report sexual activity to the younger interviewers. Only 62% of Hispanic women who were interviewed by women 41 years of age or older reported sexual activity, compared to 80% of Hispanic women who were interviewed by women 21 to 30 years

Table 2. Multivariate Analysis of Variance for Effects of Interviewer Age on Reporting of Sexual Behavior for Hispanic Women, Detroit, 1991

Dependent Variable	Means by Interviewer's Age (in years)			<i>F</i> (<i>df</i> = 2, 26)	<i>p</i>
	21 to 30	31 to 40	41 or older		
Total sample (<i>N</i> = 351)					
Sex active	0.80	0.68	0.62	6.64	< .01
Sexually active sample (<i>n</i> = 242)					
Abortion	0.09	0.08	0.12	1.09	<i>ns</i>
Live birth	0.61	0.62	0.72	3.81	< .05
Condom last sex	0.24	0.30	0.19	1.25	<i>ns</i>
Number of partners last year	1.21	1.38	1.16	1.05	<i>ns</i>
Anal sex	0.08	0.16	0.01	2.27	<i>ns</i>

NOTE: Multivariate analysis of variance models include interviewer's age and individual interviewer effects (nested within interviewer's age) as factors, and controls for respondent's age and education. The *F* tests for the interviewer age effects were calculated by dividing the mean square for interviewer age by the mean square for individual interviewer effects nested within interviewer age.

of age. Among the sexually active Hispanic women, more live births were reported to older interviewers.

Analyses were also run for Hispanic men and African American women and men. For these three groups, interviewer's age was not significantly associated with any of the measures of sexual behavior. These tables are not shown here, but are available from the authors.

Discussion

This article has examined the relationship between interviewer age and the reporting of sexual and reproductive behavior of African American and Hispanic youth. One limitation of the study was that we did not assess the influence of interviewer characteristics on response rates or for obtaining parental consent of minors. Thus, the results pertain only to reporting of sensitive behaviors after the respondent (and parents of minors) has agreed to the interview.

The interviewer's age did have some influence on reporting. For Hispanic females, an important result was that they reported more sexual activity to the youngest interviewers. Because sexual experience before marriage is not acceptable for women in traditional Hispanic culture, it is possible that an older woman may increase the salience of normative standards, and conse-

quently, these women may be providing more socially desirable responses to the older interviewers.

For Hispanic males and African American males and females, interviewer's age did not seem to affect reporting of these behaviors. Reporting of these behaviors is less sensitive for these groups.

The results for Hispanic women may have implications for ethnic differences observed in national surveys. Although it is difficult to document, the interviewing staff of large survey organizations tends to include very few women in their 20s and early 30s. For example, data reported by Berk and Bernstein (1988) on interviewers employed by two large survey organizations showed that 86% of interviewers who worked on their survey were 40 years of age or older. At the same time, Hispanic women report substantially less sexual behavior in national surveys (Forrest & Singh, 1990). It is possible that the use of female interviewers who are older than the survey respondents may increase the observed differences between ethnic groups. If so, then the sexual behavior of young Hispanic women may be closer to that of other groups than is often reported.

In summary, this article has examined effects of interviewer age on reporting of sexual and reproductive behavior in a probability sample of urban youth. The influence of interviewer's age was greatest for Hispanic women, who reported less sexual behavior to older interviewers.

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