Improving the Scope and Quality of Data on Youth Sexual Behavior Using the Relationship History Calendar

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BACKGROUND

Collecting data on sexual behaviors presents many challenges, particularly in developing countries with lower levels of literacy and limited access to more sophisticated and confidential technologies. However, face-to-face interviews are prone to misreporting due to social desirability bias, which occurs when a respondent gives an inaccurate response to conceal information deemed socially unacceptable (Gregson et al. 2002). In particular, men consistently report more sexual partners and more non-marital sexual activity than women. Demographers have been creative in designing new approaches to minimize this bias and to ensure confidentiality, such as audio computer-assisted self-interviewing, as well as low-technology private response methods such as using ballot boxes to submit answers to sensitive questions.

One of the most promising methods to collect comprehensive and sensitive information is the incorporation of life history calendars into standard survey instruments. Life history calendars were developed to collect information by emphasizing context and change over the life course (Axtin et al. 1997; Elder et al. 2003), gathering data on major events such as marriage, birth, contraceptive use, schooling, and the like. However, there has been limited use of these calendars to capture the changing nature of relationships and sexual behaviors among young people.

This Research Brief highlights an innovative type of life history calendar — the Relationship History Calendar — that was developed by PSTC Associate Nancy Luke, Associate Professor of Sociology, and colleagues to collect more accurate and thorough sexual behavior data from young people, and compare the quality of data it collected with conventional face-to-face interview approaches such as those used in the Demographic and Health Surveys.

DATA AND METHODS

The Relationship History Calendar (RHC) is designed to gather retrospective information on romantic (non-sexual) and sexual relationships and other important life course domains for the respondent during the 10 years before the survey. The RHC is designed as a fold-out grid with sections of time in months and years noted across the top of the grid. Life domains such as schooling and relationships are represented as timelines that extend across the 10-year reference period. For each relationship, it records partner characteristics, relationship dimensions that influence sexual behaviors, and details on frequency of sex, condom use, and use of other contraceptives.

The RHC interview is conversational in nature, and the interviewer and respondent work together to fill out the timeline. To accurately report the occurrence and timing of each relationship, respondents reference the dates of public and personal events known as “landmarks” (such as national elections or the death of a parent). The flexible interview procedure also allows for cross-checking to resolve inconsistencies.

The researchers designed a benchmark survey instrument, the Sexual Partnership Questionnaire (SPQ), which is based upon the 2003 Kenya DHS questionnaire, to compare sexual behavior reporting to the RHC reports. The RHC and SPQ instruments produce the same set of variables on sexual behavior, albeit collected in different ways, to allow for comparisons. The outcomes considered include measures of sexual activity over the life course and over the past year.

A randomized field experiment was conducted in Kisumu, Kenya, and included a sample of 1,275 young people aged 18-24. Enumeration areas mapped by the Kenyan government’s Central Bureau of Statistics were used as sampling units. Ten interviewers were trained to administer both the RHC and the SPQ, and a team of researchers went over all completed RHC and SPQ questionnaires at the end of each day to check for missing responses or inconsistencies.

FINDINGS

Since the RHC aims to minimize social desirability bias, the researchers expected to find less reported sexual activity among young male respondents compared to those interviewed using the more standard SPQ. As expected, for all lifetime measures of sexual activity for males, the RHC figures are statistically significantly lower than the SPQ figures, with the exception of age at first sex, which does not differ by interview instrument. In particular, reports of multiple lifetime partnerships are almost three times higher among those interviewed with the SPQ (78%), compared to the RHC (69%), and measures of sexual activity in the past year are more than 10 percentage points lower (70%) than among male respondents interviewed with the SPQ (82%). Male respondents interviewed with the RHC were also less likely to report having sex (98% versus 93% with the SPQ).

Among young female respondents interviewed with the RHC, the researchers expected to find greater numbers of reported sexual partners than those interviewed with the SPQ. While there are no significant differences across instrument type in the measures of lifetime sexual partners, the percentage of women who reported multiple partners over the past year was almost three times higher among those interviewed with the RHC (14%) than among those interviewed using the more traditional method (5%). Women interviewed with the RHC were also more likely to report inconsistent condom use (67% versus 61% with the SPQ). Exit interview data with respondents from both surveys also suggest that the RHC fostered greater enjoyment and rapport between interviewer and respondent than the SPQ.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest that the RHC improves reporting on multiple measures of sexual behavior for both young men and young women. The researchers conclude that this enhanced reporting is most likely a function of decreases in social desirability biases brought about by administration of the RHC. The high-quality, detailed data collected with the RHC can be used to examine the dynamic nature of sexual behaviors using event-history techniques, and the relationship can be explored as an important context in multilevel modeling. The inclusion of time-varying information on other important life course domains, such as migration and schooling, can also be used to investigate the factors driving sexual behaviors of youth.

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Nyambukapa, C. (2002). Methods to reduce social desirability bias in sex surveys. In M. J. Shanahan (Ed.), Handbook of the sexual behavior reporting to the RHC reports. The RHC and SPQ instruments produce the same set of variables on sexual behavior, albeit collected in different ways, to allow for comparisons. The outcomes considered include measures of sexual activity over the life course and over the past year.

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