Talking about rape: South African men’s responses to questions about rape.

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Introduction: GBV in South Africa

- Prevalence of GBV and rape in South Africa is very high
- Rapes notably violent usually involves young victims
- If we are combat violence by means other than incarceration, then we need to be able to change attitudes & behaviors
- Ability and willingness to change of those who perpetrate such violence

- Discourses of violence have been identified as important, as they not only express thought but play an active role in the construction of ideas through legitimating and even motivating violence
- What men say is, in other ways is part of the problem (Hearn 1998)
Introduction: Talking to men about rape

- A language of denial works to distance men from their own violence and to excuse and even justify it (Hearn 1998)
- Whilst talking to men about violence may not always lead to reduction in the likelihood of future acts
- Research suggest that a particular approach to talking to men about their violence had positive outcomes (Dobash et al, 2000)
- Men who were asked to take responsibility for their violence were much less likely to be recidivist on their departure from prison
- This approach was taken up in various ways in South Africa (ADAPT a group in Alexandra Township & Engenderhealth and Sonke Gender Justice’s digital stories) see Madonsela (2000)
Introduction: Talking to men about rape

- Challenge facing activism to end violence against women is that men, who are routinely involved in sexual violence and who live in contexts where it is accepted, may be disinclined to see anything wrong with their behavior (see Bourgois 2004).

- It is thus not automatic that young men involved in rape will seek to accept responsibility or talk frankly about the act and their role in it.

- Research is an important tool in developing approaches to rape prevention and services for survivors.

- This encouraged our research to study men’s health, masculinities and rape perpetration.

- Recognised that we were dependent on men being candid & honest in their responses, we tested our questionnaire using cognitive interview technique.
Aim of presentation:

- This presentation aims to discuss the findings of our cognitive interviews and the men’s responses to being asked about rape.
Methods

- Preparing to conduct a community-based research on men, their health and masculinities, including rape perpetration

- Questionnaire development stage

- In the course of this, we have been using cognitive interviews to make sure that the questions were useful and appropriately framed

- Realized and recognized that respondents occupy an important position in the conduct of empirical research

- In this respect, we drew on existing work on the methodology of interviewing men which stresses the importance of trust and openness
Methods cont.

- 20 cognitive interviews were conducted with men aged between 18 and 49 years
- Participants were recruited from Mthatha, a small town in the Eastern Cape, two university colleges and surrounding villages
- Snowball sampling technique
- Consent process
- Structured questionnaire administered by the interviewer
- After each section, we nested open-ended questions to probe their feelings after answering the questions
Methods cont.

- To establish if the questions had caused discomfort and if that might have led or have led to dishonesty

- Probed their understanding and interpretation of questions

- Interviews conducted in IsiXhosa (local language)

- Open ended questions were audio recorded, translated and transcribed verbatim

- Content analysis

- Medical Research Council’s Ethics Committee, and participants signed the consent document
Attitudes towards Rape

- In general men reported that they were comfortable-rape
- First set of questions explored rape myths
  - ‘many rapes happen because women lead men on’
- Men felt comfortable answering these questions
- Many viewed rape as a bad & disturbing issue, thus is important to discuss about it.
- We learnt however, that men agreed with many rape myth questions
- Further they saw rape as a problem for men rather than an abuse of women
- We found that” it is thus not necessarily the case that men’s willingness to discuss rape indicated sympathy towards rape survivors & more gender equitable views.
These findings raise ethical & methodological issues.

They remind us of the importance of unpacking responses explicitly, for example with questions like:

- ’What made you feel bad or what disturbed you’

We should not assume that there is universality in the way people may be affected by rape.

Another ethical issue relates to the use of rape myth questions in research.

It is hard to ask these questions without implicitly colluding with patriarchal attitudes towards rape.

Such questions may imply that the researchers endorse these views.
Attitudes towards rape cont.

- This impression is buttressed by general statements that appear before such a set of questions “there are no right or wrong answers.
- Methodological texts on interviewing emphasise importance of putting participants at ease.
- We agree with this, but, we found the comfort of participants with these questions disturbing.
- Participants felt at ease because they believed that the interviewer condones such behavior.
- Possibility exists that researchers could be seen as colluding with these behaviors.
- We need to find a balance on this, to be careful in a way we contextualize rape myth questions.
Exploring Acts of Rape

- We asked a series of questions about whether the participants had ever coerced sex or raped in a range of different circumstances.

- We asked very specific questions about sexual behaviors' and forms of sexual coercion.

- “How many times have you had sex with a woman in the vagina or anus or put your fingers in her vagina after you told lies, threatened to end the relationship or pleaded with her until she agreed?"

- We found different responses on this.
Exploring Acts of Rape cont.

Many men felt comfortable answering these questions.

But in discussing their feelings, they indicated that if they responded affirmatively they would be admitting at some stage to having raped or coerced sex. They found this disturbing.

Some told us they responded to these questions with fear of being labeled a rapist, and being arrested, or of being judged harshly by the interviewer.

The discomfort of realising that previous actions amounted to rape invoked several responses.
Common response was to try and re-establish distance from the actions.

One participant did this by offering an explanation of diminished responsibility due to being very young and not having understood the seriousness.

Another way was to criticize the questions as being too explicit. This was partly framed culturally in terms of the use of language.

Others were not comfortable with the detail of the questions around sexual behaviors (private matter).
Discussion

- As discomfort with the questions was framed in cultural terms, our data revealed that the men who expressed these concerns, in most cases were the ones who acknowledged having previously coerced sex.

- When using slang or vague terms, they were able to separate their actions from the label of rape.

- Specificity of questions undermined this, thus they found it discomforting.

- Participant told us they would protect themselves from discomfort by responding dishonestly to such questions.
It is crucial to emphasise the difference in response:

- Questions about attitude allowed for abstract, impersonal answers. This did not lead men to consider their own actions.
- Those on coercive behaviour invited them to confront and evaluate their own actions.
- Although questions caused discomfort, the research precipitated men into a process of assigning meaning to previous deeds in a way that they had not done before.
- With this, we believe a process with the potential for being gender-transformative was occurring.
- This has also been discussed by Frosh et al (2002) and Kupers (1993).
Discussion cont.

◆ In methodological terms, the reaction of men to the explicitness of the questions is important.

◆ Guarding against undermining the transformative potential of the research colluding with men’s distancing their acts from the label of rape…

◆ It seems counter-productive to ask questions in a way that men would react to by answering dishonestly.

◆ We say the challenge in research is to find a middle ground.
Discussion cont.

- Trends in methodological research on rape from North America have moved towards enhancing the specificity of the sex acts assessed and tactics used to compel them and their intersections.

- Research shows that, at least at a certain level, higher rape prevalence are reported with more precise questioning (Fisher and Cullen, 2000).

- Our research suggests that there may be important cultural differences in the acceptability of such approaches to question design.
In South Africa, there is some ambiguity about what constitutes an act of sex.

This can lead to under-reporting of certain acts.

However, this risk has to be offset against a risk of dishonest reporting by men who have raped and are offended by the explicit nature of the questions.

There is almost certain a trade off, but more researchers would prefer use of legal definition of act of rape.
Our research suggests that listening to men’s views on more acceptable wording can lead to better question design. This is without diminishing the meaning of the acts being assessed.

However, some researchers have advised that when researching men who have used violence, in ensuring that the research process in non-collusive interviewees should be openly confronted by labeling the behaviour as abusive and making perpetrators accountable for their actions at the end of the interview.
Our research suggests that such overt approaches may not be necessary. If asking fairly explicit questions enables men to engage in cognitive processing and, by themselves, reach the conclusion that they have been abusive, it is likely to have far greater impact on the men. Latter approach also avoids the interviewer overtly judging the research participants. This talks to the promise of protection of research participants, respect for persons.
Findings show that despite discomfort participants expressed when asked questions about rape in a research situation, they are willing to answer and talk about sexual violence. Researchers need to invest enough time explaining the purpose of the study, assuring freedom not to answer and emphasize the importance of honesty when answering questions.

Our research suggests that rape research ought to be approached with great care and sensitivity. Use of computer as a data collection tool. Anonymity in rape research, was identified as key.

Major concern is on balancing being non-collusive, maintain some distance and to be non-judgmental.
Conclusion

- The process of asking men to reflect on their pasts actions in coercing women into sex can be one in which new meanings are ascribed to acts, and through this process men can be brought to take personal responsibility for their past (Dobash et al, 2002)

- It is assumed that when a person accepts responsibility for violence, his behaviour in a range of contexts will be more responsible and less violent

- In this way, the process of research can itself be viewed as gender-transformative and thus part of a radical process of change