

Improving Self-Reports about High Risk Sexual Behavior

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Project Description

In this study we will conduct an experiment to test the effectiveness of an innovative method of administering a survey interview--conversational interviewing--in reducing respondents' reporting errors in their responses to sexual behavior questions common in HIV/AIDS research. In studies comparing conversational interviewing to standardized interviewing, conversational interviewing resulted in remarkable improvements in respondents' understanding of the intended meaning of survey questions and in the accuracy of respondents' answers.

The standardized method of administering survey questions states that if respondents request clarification regarding the meaning of a survey item, interviewers are instructed to read the question again, and if confusion persists, say, "Whatever it means to you." In contrast, the conversational interviewing method maintains the basic structure of the survey interview but adds procedures to allow interviewers to assist respondents to understand survey questions that are posing difficulties.

We will use a mixed method design (n=200) to (1) conduct an experiment comparing conversational interviewing to standard interviewing in a sexual behavior survey; and (2) conduct an in-depth debriefing interview immediately after the survey interview is completed to identify the types of comprehension issues that occurred in the interview.

Significance

Research findings of sex surveys over the past two decades provide abundant empirical evidence that the validity of self-reports of sexual behavior is a major problem. Improving respondents' comprehension of survey questions about sexual behavior is an important step in improving the quality of data fundamental to HIV research, particularly intervention research in which the ultimate findings are dependent on respondents' comprehension of survey items used to assess intervention effectiveness. To date, experiments evaluating the effectiveness of conversational interviewing have been confined to surveys about employment or recent purchases. No research has explored the application of the conversational interviewing method to sexual behavior research.

Project Dates: August 2009 through July 2011