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ABSTRACT

To explore the issue of sensitivity as it affects researchers, and to determine if the standard norms for talking about intimate issues in romantic relationships would be true of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) phenomenon, a pilot study surveyed 246 undergraduates from a medium-sized Mid-Atlantic university who were enrolled in introductory public speaking courses. Open-ended questions asked students to think of specific instances when they talked about AIDS in romantic relationships, did not talk about AIDS in romantic relationships, and used indirect strategies to gather information about potential intimates. The last question asked participants to evaluate whether AIDS had made a difference in the ways they date. The Conflict Resolution Inventory developed by McFall and Lillesand was also administered to measure a general level of assertiveness. Results indicated that the questions demonstrated various levels of sensitivity, and that the issue of AIDS was being addressed by at least half of the students in the sample. (MM)

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COLLEGE STUDENT TALK ABOUT AIDS: A METHODOLOGICAL
STUDY OF SENSITIVE ISSUES

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INTRODUCTION

My first brush with studying sensitive issues was a dissertation study of dismissal interviews in organizations (Michal, 1981). The barriers to studying the phenomenon in its natural habitat made direct observation impossible. Legal constraints, the impact on confidentiality, disruption of the process, as well as the volatility of the situation conspired to make the event extremely sensitive. So, unable to directly observe the phenomenon in the field, I chose to study what I could study, manager's perceptions of the dismissal interview.

It is only years later that I realize the deficiencies in my own understanding of the construct of sensitivity in the research process. In consulting sociologists, social workers and psychologists for this paper, I have concluded that my deficiency may be a shared one. Where do we go to make sense of the construct of sensitivity? Is there a seminal article or a model to which researchers may turn to try to better understand the sensitivity of research projects, questions asked, and design? Or is the collective wisdom in the social sciences more randomly available to us, in bits and pieces? Does sensitivity ever itself function as a confounding variable, distorting claims which we make? All of these questions resulted in a quest for the best available advice on handling research of sensitive issues.

In this paper, I have set out to better understand the issue of sensitivity as it affects researchers. First, the paper seeks to establish a definition of "sensitive" as it relates to issues, information, and the process of information retrieval. Second, the essay will review some of the more common approaches used to study

sensitive issues across the social sciences. Third, the research methods texts commonly used in graduate education will be mined for their contributions and guidance in studying sensitive issues. Finally, I will explore the methodology used to study college student talk about AIDS in romantic relationships in Bowen and Michal-Johnson (1988) as it informs the emerging criteria for studying sensitive issues.

DEFINITION OF SENSITIVE ISSUES

If we look for definitions of "sensitive" we are likely to find statements like the following: "excitable, touchy, easily offended" (Funk and Wagnalls, 1966). Hence, in studying sensitive issues, we might assume that we are approaching topics which are likely to make subjects (research participants) more "excitable, touchy or easily offended." As we look at research projects, the entire project may be thought of as sensitive or simply a few aspects of the project may require answers to sensitive questions.

SENSITIVE ISSUES

One concern of researchers may be whether the area of study they want to explore is in itself more sensitive than others. With the issue of AIDS, we felt that the issue/phenomenon itself is sensitive because there are so many volatile issues embedded in it. Mortality, sexual histories, homophobia, fear of transmission and morality of life styles all serve to make it a loaded issue. While there are many topical areas of study that are as volatile as AIDS, one might expect that far more research studies ask selected sensitive questions.

SENSITIVE INFORMATION

It is possible that while an issue of study may be relatively benign, certain demographics or opinions requested might be considered private, personal or none of the researcher's business. In conversations with other researchers, I heard more than once that the topic of income is more sensitive for many people than intimate sexual questions. Family history and level of education were also mentioned in these conversations. Information may be viewed as sensitive if it would negatively impact the participant should the information be divulged to others.

Health and Human Services policy mandating Institutional Review Boards regulates confidentiality norms for research (See appendix A). It is not clear that stating the Human Subjects Review restrictions to subjects before participation actually encourages respondents to be more open to the questions asked in the study. The informed consent provisos initiate a more formal, almost contractual relationship between the researcher and the subject. At any rate, both the legal and ethical issues inherent in research of sensitive issues must be recognized. It is certainly a legitimate question to address.

RETRIEVING SENSITIVE INFORMATION

Whether a researcher identifies with quantitative or qualitative research traditions, whether the researcher engages in experimental research, survey research, field research via participant /nonparticipant observation, self-administered questionnaires, depth interviewing, etc.; he or she must cope with the potential impact the sensitivity construct brings to the project. To retrieve

sensitive information in the most appropriate ways, we need to understand if sensitivity is idiosyncratic or if it can be studied by looking for patterns or typologies of sensitivity. Are some variables more prone to sensitive reaction effects than others? For instance, what is the function of timing to sensitivity? When questions are asked could affect outcomes. Does it vary for subjects of different ages, or with different cultural/family experiences? Are there gender differences in the ability to respond to sensitive queries?

So, then, what are the implications for the researcher? First, the researcher has to develop an awareness of what issues/questions would be considered sensitive to what audience, at what time. How can this be accomplished? Is it an intuitive process? Does the scholar have clear ways of discerning how to spot sensitivity as a factor in all stages of research? Are there commonsense rules that are used to discriminate between sensitive and nonsensitive information? Is it a matter of maturity in research that enables people to make decisions about the sensitivity, thus validity, of the data retrieved? It should be obvious that in this initial query this researcher has more questions than answers.

Assuming as Douglas (1976) does that we are searching for TRUTH, we must at least entertain the possibility that data generated from subjects may be more vulnerable to refusal, denial, deception, distortion, etc., when the overall topic of research is sensitive, or when we ask questions that are perceived as sensitive. Green and Tull (1970) cited fear of lost prestige and embarrassment as two reasons for distortions in response to sensitive questions. It is possible to argue that researchers have indi-

rectly approached the issue of sensitivity through standard approaches to validity and reliability. However, to the researcher it may still feel like walking across a mine field, never knowing if the sensitivity of the issue will compromise the integrity of the study.

GUIDANCE FOR RESEARCHERS OF SENSITIVE ISSUES

Generic Ways of Studying Sensitive Issues

One of the things that struck me as I looked at research on information gathered from alcoholics and other drug abusers, victims of date rape, and romantic partners, was the nature of the taken-for-granted assumptions that social scientists bring to the research of issues. In initial reviews of the research literatures of market research, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, date rape, sexually transmitted diseases, and AIDS, few researchers address the question of sensitivity of their questions directly in the articles themselves. Rather they rely on other tools for legitimizing the accuracy of responses to sensitive questions. This may involve triangulating data from different sources to verify information offered. Researchers may rely on statistical or randomizing techniques, they may manipulate the setting to enhance confidentiality, or they may depend on the experience of the researcher as a clinician to know how to approach sensitive issues comfortably in field interviewing situations. Before going to the studies which clarify these options, it may be helpful to pay attention to the sorts of data most often seen in these studies.

Self-Reports

By and large the most common sort of data in the studies I reviewed was self-report data. If it is not the most popular data gathering strategy, it is clearly used by many social scientists. Gavanski and Hoffman (1986) ask us to consider whether people are able to accurately report on their own mental processes. In general their findings suggest that individuals are able to retrieve private information that others are unable to observe about them. They have suggested that some topics have more personal relevance than others for research participants. It is also possible to infer that some topics may be more sensitive for specific subjects than for others. To correct for this sensitivity in studying alcoholics' self-reports of drinking over discrete time periods, Crawford and Chalupsky (1977) relied on others' evaluations of the subject's abstinence, program records, etc., to ascertain whether the subjects' responses were accurate.

Self-report documents submitted by subjects which are subsequently used to determine eligibility for social programs, etc., have been seen as inaccurate, because as documents they were seen as highly sensitive. Lowney (1984) has scorned the use of program records and official documents as a way of studying behaviors of drug addicts, since the drug user will only provide "pat" answers to officials, counselors, etc., because of the uses made of such documents. According to Tausig (1988), distortion is common in any formal documents which are to be used to evaluate the likelihood subjects will be accepted for specialized programs (e.g., in vitro fertilization programs), when the issues addressed are highly sensitive.

Triangulation

This paper will not examine the concept of triangulation in depth, but simply as a tool for validation of subject responses. Crawford and Chalupsky (1977) used triangulation to cross-check the accuracy of respondents to questions about drinking. Reviews of research on alcohol treatment programs depend on alternative data sources to determine legitimacy of the self-report data from alcoholics. In a review of research on women alcoholics, Beckman (1976) examined studies relying on subjects' self-report data and evaluations of interviews with significant others in their lives and treatment staff. The data were interactive and used for verification of information.

Randomization

Reinmuth and Geurts (1975), market researchers, reported a technique for randomizing the questions in their study of shoplifting behaviors in a Honolulu shopping center. They assumed that if the researcher did not ask the questions, but the subjects randomly selected questions from two different bags, they would not distort or lie when asked questions about shoplifting behaviors. A second function of their approach was to offer subjects one sensitive and one innocuous question through the random drawing of questions. They felt that asking one sensitive question after another would affect the willingness of the subject to respond.

Manipulating the Research Setting

(Self-administered questionnaires)

Catania, McDermott, and Pollack (1986) cited the self-administered questionnaire as one of the most reliable tools used

in research of highly sensitive issues. Their research of sexual behaviors indicated minimal problems with subjects responding to the self-administered questionnaires under very strict administration conditions. Subjects were separated in a large auditorium, insuring that no subject could see responses on anyone else's questionnaire. Muehlenhard and Linton (1987) used the self-administered questionnaire to detect instances of sexual aggression in dating relationships, also feeling that the setting and administration of the questionnaire insured reasonable responses to sensitive questions. Moskowitz (1983) generated higher estimations by adolescents of drug and alcohol use when using absolutely anonymous self-administered questionnaires, as compared to merely confidential questionnaires. Follow-up studies are not possible with this technique, which serves as a major limitation of the approach.

(Telephone Interviews)

Tausig and Freeman (1988) have studied the use of the telephone interview as a research medium to study sensitive issues. Their essay, grounded in the field of social work, cites a number of advantages in using the telephone interview with sensitive issues. In their study of couples who had participated in an in vitro fertilization program, visual anonymity "appeared to reduce self-consciousness or 'interviewer effect' that seems to be characteristic of face to face encounters" (Hyman, 1954)'.

However, one very important characteristic of the study should be noted when looking at the efficacy of the telephone interview. Calling was preceded by a letter to the participants, who had all

signed informed consent forms when applying for the in vitro fertilization program, and the study was authorized by the hospital which had performed the service. It was not random calling, but was institutionally sanctioned. Clearly, the semi-structured phone interview has more flexibility in clarifying issues and reducing obstacles when the interviewer is extraordinarily skilled and aware of the process.

Reliance on the Experience and Maturity of the Interviewer

Tausig, coauthor of the telephone interview study cited above, was asked in a personal interview to identify how she had constructed questions to reduce the impact of the sensitivity of the questions. She cited her lengthy experience in conducting clinical interviews over the telephone in her job. Her ability to work from an interview guide; her use of conversational strategies to link questions which related, so that the subject perceived the query as talk, not grilling; were seen as crucial to handling the interview and getting information from subjects. It was difficult to point to any graduate research course or other training which prepared her to ask sensitive questions. Apparently it was an assimilated skill. At any rate, researchers are cognizant of the construct of sensitivity in their studies, they simply use a range of strategies to attempt to regulate and control it.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH METHODS TEXTS

A second approach to understanding the implications of studying sensitive issues led me to look at some of the primary research methods texts used in both undergraduate and graduate education in

communication, sociology, and social work to determine the guidance currently available to researchers of sensitive issues. Though the following is not an exhaustive survey, it does give us a place to start in examining what we are teaching potential researchers about the construct of sensitivity. The following section details the nature of advice given to individuals concerned with the sensitivity of an issue. Both quantitatively and qualitatively oriented texts were reviewed. Some texts allude to the inherent sensitivity of some questions, others ignore it and still others treat in varying degrees.

Qualitative Sociology: Method to the Madness. Schwartz and Jacobs (1979) p. 41, talk about the discrepancy which may exist between what research participants says and what they mean. They defend the participant observation process and interviewing as a vehicle which can, with feedback, hope to clarify responses. However, no explicit attention is given to sensitive topics or issues.

Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis. Lofland and Lofland (1984) infer that the ability of an interviewer to effectively gather any sort of information is directly linked to the researcher's interpersonal competence in interviewing, not to the nature of the questions asked. They also refer to problems created by error and bias in the data. They offer seven different tests researchers may apply if they feel that they have been given erroneous information. The advice is stock in that it suggests that the researcher test the information on the basis of whether the informant was offering first-hand information, whether "there might be something about the relationship between myself and the reporter that might lead him or her to lie, distort,

omit, or falsely elaborate." p. 51. This is the only reference to possible sensitivity in the Loflands' work. The remaining five are standard tests to be found in any research methods book.

Investigative Social Research: Individual and Team Field Research. Douglas (1976) spends a significant part of his volume recognizing that "there are at least four major problems lying in the way of getting at social reality by asking people what is going on and that these problems must be dealt with if one is to avoid being taken in, duped, deceived, used, put on, fooled, suckered, made the patsy, left holding the bag, fronted out and so on." The four problems are misinformation, evasions, lies and fronts. Douglas' focus is not on the information gathering strategies as much as it is in explicating that research participants may function out of any of these perspectives when it is in their perceived best interest to do so.

Research Methods in Social Relations. Selltitz, Wrightsman, and Cook (1976) discuss the issue of sensitivity in a more generic way by referring to it as "asking personal questions in interviews and questionnaires." Their discussion simply documents that researchers from time to time do ask questions about illegal activities, intimate relationships, and personal habits.

Contemporary Communication Research Methods. Smith (1988) addresses the issue of sensitivity from an ethical perspective as it relates to Human Subjects Review mandates and advises researchers interested in socially sensitive matters to guarantee anonymity or confidentiality of results (p. 286).

Methods of Social Research. Bailey (1978) takes a different tack, saying: "Sensitive topics such as sex, or taboo topics such

as suicide, are prone to normative answers--that is, answers that are consistent with a norm even though they are false answers for the particular respondents" (p. 103). Bailey recommends that researchers may want to follow the guidance of Phillips (1971), p. 140, in framing questions. If the researcher wants a subject to respond to a question of participating in socially undesirable behavior, Phillips urges the interviewer to "assume that he or she engages in the behavior", by asking: "how frequently do you smoke marijuana?" rather than "Do you smoke marijuana? If so, how frequently?" Two other ploys are advocated by Bailey: presuming that there is no consensus on the norm in question and that the behavior is not deviant but widely practiced. Interestingly enough, Phillips also has suggested the use of euphemisms to soften the impact of the sensitive question.

The Practice of Social Research, 4th ed. (1986). Earl Babbie examines sensitivity as it relates to level of threat in questions and he uses K. McKinney's analysis of "Ethical Issues in Research in Human Sexuality," (p.456-457) to explore human subject constraints and researcher responsibility in building appropriate research designs. Specifically, regarding questions he suggests that the order of the questions may impact the capacity of subjects to respond. His advice then is to avoid initial questions that are threatening (p. 209).

COLLEGE STUDENT TALK ABOUT AIDS IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

In February of 1988 data were collected from 246 undergraduates from a medium-sized Mid-Atlantic university who were enrolled in introductory public speaking courses required by a variety of

majors. The intent of the study was twofold: 1) to determine if the standard norms for talking about intimate issues in romantic relationships would be true of the AIDS phenomenon, or if AIDS as an issue is capable of breaking down these norms as expressed by Baxter and Wilmot, Rawlins, etc.; and 2) to ascertain whether or not college students were talking about AIDS in romantic relationships, and if so, how they were talking about it. While the study approached the issue from the global level of talk in relationships without stipulating intimate/serious relationships, the expectations for the data were that there would be a wide range of talking/not talking strategies reflecting a variety of differing levels of intimacy and seriousness. Thus, this study examines a more macro-level for analysis than one might expect if questions had been limited to, for instance, specific questioning strategies. We assumed, as have Bayer, Levine, and Murray (1984), that the AIDS issue was inherently a sensitive issue.

Methodology of the Study

This study is a hybrid study, neither wholly qualitative nor quantitative. We first collected demographic, relational and risk-related information in order to place responses in perspective. Secondly, we used the critical incident technique developed by Flanagan (1954) to generate open-ended questions asking them to think of specific instances when they talked about AIDS in romantic relationships, did not talk about AIDS in romantic relationships, and used indirect strategies to gather information about potential intimates. The last question asked participants to evaluate whether AIDS has made a difference in the ways they date. The

third part of the self-administered questionnaire was the Conflict Resolution Inventory (1972) developed by McFall and Lillesand, which is a general measure of assertiveness.

Sensitive Issues and Information in the Study

Depending on the focus of the questions, responses from subjects on the topic of AIDS may have variable sensitivity. For instance, were we to ask questions about how others handle talking about AIDS in romantic relationships, that might be construed as less sensitive than asking subjects to relate their own experiences. Just as a cursory overview of the instruments we used, first consider the nature of the demographics, relational history and relational intimate behavior (risk assessment).

Generic and routine questions of classification, major, age, and sex were viewed as low-sensitivity questions, while relational history information might function at a higher level, such as questions that asked participants to cite the numbers of people they had dated since high school, the numbers of those which were serious, a definition for "serious", and whether they were currently involved in a relationship. As Babbie suggests, the most sensitive information generated in the study, which specifically addressed the nature of "intimate bodily contact" in their relationships, was not an initial question. Participants were asked to categorize their experience as (a) intimate but not including intercourse and (b) intimate including intercourse. They were further asked to clarify the context in which this behavior occurred: whether in one relationship, in one relationship at a time, or in simultaneous relationships. As Philips (1971, as reported in

Bailey, 1978) urged, euphemisms were used in referring to "intimate bodily contact" not "sexual intercourse" simply to diminish the reaction to the most highly sensitive of information requested. A final indicator about perceived knowledge about AIDS transmission was seen as much less sensitive than the preceding questions. As noted above, questions were ordered so that the most sensitive questions occurred near the end. See Appendix B for the questions asked in this study.

Critical incident questions may be understood as functioning at a several levels of sensitivity. As Gavanski and Hoffman (1986) suggest, some questions will have more personal relevance for certain individuals, because of participants' differing levels of relational experience, attitudes toward intimacy, gender, etc. Consequently, individuals with little relational experience may be less likely to have incidents or situations, other than general discussions about AIDS, to report. Conversely, individuals who might have a number of incidents they could report are then selecting an incident which they feel best reflects the target of the question.

One factor which we felt may have heightened the sensitivity of the questions asked in this study was sample specific. Participants were from a denominational university which has very strong norms opposing pre-marital sexual activity and which believes abstinence to be the most effective protection against contracting AIDS. This may have impacted the nature of the responses to an extent. Given this constraint, the researchers felt that if participants reported talking about the disease in an environment which has strong normative views about the sexual behavior of its

students, then the likelihood of talk among other college students in public, urban, universities might prove to be greater.

In this pilot study, subjects were able to offer information which illustrated that, even within this normative organization, the issue was being addressed by at least half of the students in the sample.

In analyzing the data we found that we were able to use triangulation techniques to validate some of the most sensitive data. In several instances individuals would omit responses to the question of intercourse, but would in critical incident responses refer to a specific incident which included intercourse. So it was legitimate to correct omissions.

Another interesting factor, the very small refusal rate, surprised the researchers. Given the sensitivity of the topic and information requested, and the operative norms of the institution, less than five participants chose to leave and not complete the survey. Some, however, once they had completed the inventories refused to sign the human subjects review informed consent form. There was, we felt, some confusion for subjects who felt that signing the informed consent form somehow further committed them to participate in group discussions at a later date. Even with further clarification, about 6% of the total number surveyed failed to sign the informed consent documents, invalidating use of their data in the study.

CONCLUSIONS

On the surface it appears that the phenomenon of topic and issue sensitivity is one which has not been overtly addressed in

the research methods literature in the social sciences. After searching computerized social science data bases and verifying the searches, and examining the collective wisdom of authors of research methods texts. much of the guidance appears to urge us simply to be careful. The intent of this essay has been to generate questions to be addressed by future research. Specifically, is the concept of sensitivity to research questions a significant factor to study further? How does it impact research choices and the ways that research is operationalized?

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