

Sex and Trauma Research Is Less Upsetting to College Students Than Previously Assumed

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Research on sex and trauma faces an ethical dilemma: how can we find out more about the effects of such psychologically sensitive topics without hurting the people who participate in the study?

Institutional review boards that approve research on human subjects believe that asking people about sex and trauma is riskier and more distressing than asking people to complete standard intelligence tests or personality questionnaires. As a result, research that could help us to better understand the psychological consequences of rape, child sexual abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, post-traumatic stress and sexual dysfunctions is often much more difficult to get IRB approval for, despite the potential for this research to inform mental health treatment and support overall well-being.

Now, a new study from University of New Mexico researchers Elizabeth Yeater, Geoffrey Miller, Jenny Rinehart, and Erica Nason shows that typical research participants – college undergraduates – are less upset than expected by questionnaires about sex, trauma, and other sensitive topics. This finding challenges the usual IRB assumption that surveys on sex and trauma are more stressful to participants than other types of research surveys. The study is forthcoming in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

Researcher Geoffrey Miller comments that “IRBs have been well-intentioned, but our research suggests they have often been over-protective. I hope our study helps make it easier to do the sex and trauma research that could reduce the real harm done by rape, child abuse, and other sexual problems.”

Yeater, Miller, and their collaborators randomly assigned 504 college students to spend two hours either doing standard intelligence tests, or completing trauma/sex questionnaires about a wide variety of sensitive topics – such as whether the research participant had ever been raped or raped someone else, whether they’d suffered childhood sexual abuse or physical beatings, whether they recently felt suicidal, how many sexual hook-ups they’d had, how often they have sexual fantasies about cheating on their partner, whether they would take part in an orgy, how often they have traumatic flashbacks, when their last menstrual period was, whether they use sexual lubricant while masturbating, whether they have breast implants or body piercings, and whether they’ve used a day-after contraceptive pill recently.

Participants rated their positive and negative feelings before and after the study, and rated how distressing they found the study compared to a range of 15 ordinary life events that are somewhat upsetting, such as having blood drawn or forgetting Mother’s Day. The participants who completed the trauma/sex survey reported slightly higher negative emotion on average than the intelligence-test participants, but the difference was very small, and the average level of negative emotion in both conditions was very low. On the other hand, the participants who completed the trauma/sex survey reported more positive emotion, more personal insight, less boredom, and less mental exhaustion. Most surprisingly, participants in both conditions reported that the two-hour study was significantly less

distressing than all 15 ordinary life events – even getting a paper cut, or waiting in line for 20 minutes at a bank.

The results suggest that the current generation of American college students, who grew up with South Park, Cosmopolitan magazine, and Facebook, are more psychologically resilient, and much less upset by trauma/sex research, than IRBs usually assume.

Lead researcher Elizabeth Yeater comments: “These findings highlight to me the need for us to continually test our assumptions and theories about human behavior. Without such empirical evaluation, we prevent ourselves from making scientific progress in areas that are likely to have an impact on understanding, treating, and preventing human suffering.”

The University of New Mexico’s own IRB Committee has welcomed the research and is using it to guide decisions about the risk levels of new research proposals.