

Box 7.2 How We Ask the Questions Makes a Difference in the Answers We Receive

Recall from Chapter 1 that Mary Koss and her colleagues were commissioned in the 1980s by the *Ms. Magazine* Campus Project on Sexual Assault to conduct a survey of a nationally representative sample of college women about their experiences of rape and other forms of unwanted sex. To collect the data, Koss developed the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES), a 10-item instrument that measured rape and sexual coercion in a way that no other survey instrument had ever done before: the items on the SES asked *behaviorally specific* questions about the women's unwanted sexual experiences. Koss realized that many young women subscribe to myths about "real rape" and "worthy victims," so if they were asked, "Have you ever been raped?" they would likely respond, "No." Instead, she asked, "Have you ever had sexual intercourse when you didn't want to because a man threatened or used some degree of physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.) to make you?" Koss and her colleagues received a significantly higher number of positive answers to these behaviorally specific questions than that obtained by interviewers for the NCVS (which, at that time, was the NCS—the National Crime Survey): 15 percent of respondents reported attempted rape by a man who used threats or physical force; 12 percent reported attempted rape by a man who used drugs or alcohol; 9 percent reported completed rape (sexual intercourse) by a man who used threats or physical force; 8 percent reported completed rape (sexual intercourse) by a man who used drugs or alcohol; and 6 percent reported completed rape (oral or anal sex or penetration with an object other than a penis) by a man who used threats or physical force (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; see also Koss et al., 2007).

Koss's research ignited a debate among sexual assault researchers regarding the most accurate methods for measuring victimization and perpetration of rape and other forms of coerced sex. Numerous studies have been undertaken to test a variety of methodological issues, such as question wording and research design (Bachman, 2000; Hamby & Koss, 2003; Jaquier, Johnson, & Fisher, 2011). One study (Fisher, 2009), for example, compared two surveys—the National College Women Sexual Victimization (NCWSV) study and the National Violence Against College Women (NVACW) study—to determine how differences in question wording might affect estimates of completed, attempted, and threatened rape. The NCWSV asked 12 behaviorally specific questions, whereas the NVACW used questions identical to those in the NCVS; apart from differences in number of questions and question wording, the methodology of the two studies was identical. Fisher's (2009) analysis of the data from these surveys led her to conclude that "the use of behaviorally specific questions cannot be overemphasized, not necessarily because they produce larger estimates of rape but because they use words and phrases that describe to the respondent exactly what behavior is being measured" (p. 143). In other words, behaviorally specific questions help respondents better understand what the researcher is asking and help them remember their experiences.

Fisher (2009) pointed out that using behaviorally specific questions does not make a rape or sexual assault measure "perfect," but it does appear to be a significant methodological improvement toward greater measurement reliability and accuracy. Still, Smith's (1987) characterization of measuring rape as one of the "biggest methodological challenge(s) in survey research" (p. 185) remains as well-founded today as it was in the 1980s.