

SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION AND MEASUREMENT OF CORE CONCEPTS

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ABSTRACT: *Same as other research, in routine activity theory testing for sexual victimization defining, operationalizing, and measuring theoretical concepts is very important. Because the definition and operationalization of theoretical concepts and the measurement of these as variables are fundamental to the research process, especially when testing the explanatory and predictive powers of any theory. In this paper, the following issues are discussed. First, possible threats to validity and reliability are identified when researchers have attempted to define, operationalization and measure the core concepts of lifestyle-exposure and routine activity theory. Also, how these threats undermine the valid and reliable measurement of these core concepts is explained. Second, threats to validity and reliability inherent in measurement of sexual victimization are identified discussed. Finally, plausible explanations are offered as to how and why these threats to both sexual assault victimization and core concepts influence the statistical testing of the explanatory and predictive powers of routine activity theory.*

KEYWORDS: Sexual victimization, Lifestyle-exposure, Routine Activity Theory, Theoretical Concepts, Statistical Testing

INTRODUCTION

The definition and operationalization of theoretical concepts and the measurement of these as variables are fundamental to the research process, especially when testing the explanatory and predictive powers of any theory. In this paper, I will pick sexual victimization and discuss the following issues. The unit of analysis is an individual. First, I will identify possible threats to validity and reliability when researchers have attempted to define, operationalization and measure the core concepts of lifestyle-exposure and routine activity theory (LRAT). Also, I will explain how these threats undermine the valid and reliable measurement of these core concepts. Second, I will identify and discuss threats to validity and reliability inherent in measurement of sexual victimization. Finally, I will offer plausible explanations as to how and why these threats to both sexual assault victimization and core concepts influence the statistical testing of the explanatory and predictive powers of LRAT.

IDENTIFYING THREATS TO THE CORE CONCEPTS OF LRAT AND EXPLANATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE THREATS

Using the Indicators to Measure Key Concepts of Other Theories

There are some cases where indicators of LRAT key concepts are same as indicators of key concepts of other theories. For example, in LRAT testing, unemployment is often used as a proxy measure of motivated offenders. However, “unemployment” is also used to measure key concepts of support economic theory or social disorganization

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theory (Madero-Hernandez & Fisher, 2012). Another example is “living in urban” or “living in poor neighborhood”. The indicators are used as proxy measures of proximity to motivated offenders. However, the indicators are used as proxy measures of weak social control, population heterogeneity, and low economic opportunity for testing other theories (Miethe & Meier, 1994). The two examples show that using the indicators used to measure key concepts of other theories to measure LRAT key concepts undermines the valid and reliable measurement of LRAT key concepts by blocking precise capture of LRAT key concepts.

Using the Same Indicators to Measure Different Key Concepts

Some indicators may measure more than one key concepts of LRAT (Meier & Miethe, 1993; Spano & Freilich, 2009). Two examples are as follows. The first example is “family income.” Some research used “family income” as an indicator of guardianship because rich family can afford to buy protective means (Cohen et al, 1981). However, “family income” may include the concept of exposure to motivated offender because rich people can afford to go out and spend entertainment (Miethe & Meier, 1994). The second example is “drug or alcohol”. Some research used “drug or alcohol” as an indicator of target attractiveness because “drug or alcohol” weakens individuals’ protective capacity (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2002; Schwart & Pitts, 1995; Spano & Nancy, 2005). However, other research used the same indicators to measure exposure to motivated offenders (Sampson & Lauritsen, 1990) and weak guardianship (Gover, 2004). Also, there was research where the same indicators was used to measure proximity to motivated offender and target attractiveness together (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2002). These examples show that using the same indicators to measure different LRAT key concepts undermines the valid and reliable measurement of LRAT key concepts by blocking precise capture of LRAT key concepts.

Different Influences of the Same Indicators According to Types of Crimes

The influences of LRAT key concepts on victimization may vary according to types of crimes. For example, “non-household activity” was used to measure exposure to motivated offender for property victimization (Miethe et al, 1987). However, the same indicator may be used to measure guardianship for parental sexual assault because the parental sexual assault is committed not by strangers but by caregivers (Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996). “Non-household activity” works as risk factors for property victimization. However, it can be regarded as protective factors for parental sexual assault (Madero-Hernandez & Fisher, 2012). The example shows that if an indicator is used to measure a key concept without considering types of crimes, the indicator may not capture the key concept correctly. Hence, different influences of the same indicators according to types of crimes undermines the valid and reliable measurement of the key concepts.

IDENTIFYING AND DISCUSSING THREATS TO MEASUREMENT OF SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION

Hidden Figure of Sexual Victimization

Most of rape victims does not report their victimizations (Fisher et al, 2010). For example, comparison between National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and police report showed that approximately 31% of rape and sexual assault were reported

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between 1992 and 2000 (Hart & Rennison, 2003). Also, recent research showed that female college students reported less than 5% of rapes and only 2.1% of sexual victimizations (Fisher et al, 2010). The inclination reluctant to report sexual victimization is a threat to validity and reliability inherent in measurement of sexual victimization. It undermines validity and reliability in measurement of sexual victimization because it interferes with accurate measurement of sexual victimization.

Various Interpretations of Sexual Victimization by the Victims

Sexual victimization is often related with known people and party using alcohol or drugs (Fisher et al, 2010). Thus, it is not easy to determine the degree of agreement. The objective behaviors can be interpreted in various ways by the victims. For example, in Sexual Experiences Survey by Koss 73% of respondents classified as rape victims did not think of themselves as rape victims (Gilbert, 1997). Many sexual victims did not recognize their victimization, did not report their victimization to the police (Fisher et al, 2010). An inappropriate interpretation of sexual victimization by the victims is a threat to validity and reliability inherent in measurement of sexual victimization. It undermines validity and reliability in measurement of sexual victimization because it interferes with accurate measurement of sexual victimization.

Other People's Participation during Interview

If family members or known people participate in the interview to measure Sexual victimization, it can interfere with honest answer. This is because many offenders of sexual abuse are the family members or known people (Koss, 1993). For example, if a stepfather who raped his stepdaughter participates in the sexual victimization interview for the stepdaughter, she cannot make an honest answer. Thus, other people's participation during interview is a threat to validity and reliability inherent in measurement of sexual victimization. It undermines validity and reliability in measurement of sexual victimization because it interferes with accurate measurement of sexual victimization.

Wording of Survey Questions

The most prominent methodological differences between surveys is screener questions that asks about previous instances of victimization to respondents (Bachman, 2012). For screener questions, some surveys (e.g., NCVS) use direct reference to sexual victimization (e.g., any rapes or attempted rapes) and other surveys (e.g., National College Women Sexual Victimization) use graphical behaviorally-specific language (e.g., they put their penis in your mouth). The difference between screener questions cause different study results. Many studies showed that rates of rape and sexual assault in NCVS are lower compared to other surveys that use graphical behaviorally-specific language (Bachman, 2000; Fisher, 2009; Rand & Rennison, 2005). For example, Fisher (2009) found that after comparing National Violence Against College Women (NVACW) survey that did not use graphical behaviorally-specific language with National College Women Sexual Victimization (NCWSV) study that uses it, rape estimates from the NVACW was from 4.4% to 10.4% lower than NCWSV due to graphically-worded screener questions. Inappropriate wording of survey questions is a threat to validity and reliability inherent in measurement of sexual assault victimization. That is, poor wording undermines validity and reliability in measurement of sexual victimization, because it interferes with accurate measurement of sexual victimization.

Different Definitions of Sexual Victimization

Definitions of sexual victimization are different between surveys. For example, unlike the NCVS, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence survey (NISVS) includes the incidents that occur “when the victim was drunk, high, drugged, or passed out and unable to consent” (Bachman, 2012, p. 18). An inappropriate definition of sexual victimization is a threat to validity inherent in measurement of sexual victimization. It undermines validity and reliability in measurement of sexual victimization, because it interferes with accurate measurement of sexual victimization.

Series Victimizations

Recognizing the extent of a series victimization is different between surveys. For example, for a series victimization, the highest number was 10 in NCVS (Truman, 2011, p. 4) whereas the highest number of the National Violence Against Women Survey (NCAWS) recognized 24 rape victimizations as a series victimization (Bachman, 2000). NCVS may make the estimates of sexual victimization lower compared to other surveys that do not limit the maximum number for a series of victimization. The inappropriate extent of a series of victimization is a threat to validity and reliability inherent in measurement of sexual victimization. It undermines validity and reliability in measurement of sexual victimization, because it interferes with the accurate measurement of sexual victimization.

Survey Contexts

How surveys are introduced to respondents is different between surveys (Bachman, 2012). The difference may explain the difference of responses (Lynch, 1996). For example, NCVS uses a context that asks criminal victimization experiences to respondents as seen from the name. Whereas, the NISVS is seen as a survey that has interest in health issues (Bachman, 2012). Hence, the NISVS may induce respondents to report criminal victimizations that they are reluctant to report in the NCVS, and cause more instances of sexual victimization to be revealed. An experiment by Galesic and Tourangeau (2007) supports the hypothesis. They selected two groups randomly. Then, they handed in a survey with the heading of “Sexual Harassment Survey” from “Women Against Sexual Harassment” to a group and another survey with the heading of “Work Atmosphere” from “Work Environment Institute.” The result showed that a group receiving “Sexual Harassment Survey” reported more sexual harassment. An inappropriate survey context is a threat to construct validity and reliability inherent in measurement of sexual victimization. It undermines validity and reliability in measurement of sexual victimization because it interferes with the accurate measurement of sexual victimization.

Reference Period

The NCVS asks crimes experienced within six months. The six months of reference period is to decrease measurement errors caused by longer reference periods (Bachman, 2012). Whereas, many other surveys use longer reference periods, such as 12 months or one’s entire lifetime (Bachman, 2012). An inappropriate reference period is a threat to validity and reliability inherent in measurement of sexual victimization. It undermines validity and reliability in measurement of sexual victimization because it interferes with accurate measurement of sexual victimization by influencing respondents’ memory.

Ways to Ask Questions

NCVS uses two-stage process to ask questions. It asks screening questions for respondents to think about a wide range of victimization in many contexts at first and then ask specific questions. Whereas most of surveys use only screening questions to measure victimization incidents. That is, if respondents say yes in screening questions, it is recorded as a rape (Bachman, 2012). The one-stage process may make behaviors that are not classified as rapes according to most criminal laws recorded as rapes (Fisher et al, 2010). Inappropriate ways to ask questions is a threat to validity and reliability inherent in measurement of sexual victimization. It undermines validity and reliability in measurement of sexual victimization, because it interferes with accurate measurement of sexual victimization.

THE INFLUENCES OF THE THREATS ON THE EXPLANATORY AND PREDICTIVE POWERS OF LRAT TESTING ON SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION

The Influences of the Threats to Core Concepts

The threats to core concepts may undermine the validity of the statistical testing of the explanatory and predictive powers of LRAT. They cause questions about whether the indicators accurately measure core concepts. Hence, they make it questionable that the findings are the effects of the key concepts in the statistical testing of the explanatory and predictive powers of LRAT. Several examples are as follows. The first example is about using the indicators to measure key concepts of other theories. If “unemployment” used to measure key concepts of social economic theory or social disorganization theory is used as proxy measure of proximity or exposure to motivated offenders in LRAT testing, significant relationship between “unemployment” and sexual victimization can be interpreted as supporting social economic theory or social disorganization theory instead of LRAT (Pratt & Cullen, 2005). The second example is about using the same indicators to measure different key concepts. Mustaine and Tewksbury (2002) found that female college students who used drug in public places had higher general sexual assault victimization and serious sexual assault victimization compared to female college students who used drug in other places. In the LRAT testing, they used “drug use in public” as an indicator of both proximity to motivated offender and target attractiveness. Hence, which concept between the two constructs influenced the victimizations is not clear. The final example is about different influences of the same indicators according to types of crimes. Normally “attachment to family” is used to measure guardianship in LRAT testing (Schreck & Fisher, 2004). However, if “attachment to family” is used to measure guardianship in LRAT testing for parental sexual assault victimization, the results cannot be easily accepted because caregivers may be offenders in the victimization.

The Influences of the Threats to Sexual Victimization

The threats to sexual victimization may undermine the validity of the statistical testing of the explanatory and predictive powers of LRAT. They cause questions about whether sexual victimization was accurately measured. As a result, they make it difficult to accept the findings on the influence of core concepts on sexual victimization without a doubt. The influences of each threat to sexual victimization on the statistical testing of the explanatory and predictive powers of LRAT are as follows. The first example is

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about hidden figure of sexual victimization and various interpretations of sexual victimization by the victims. Cass (2007) used “marital status” as an indicator of proximity to motivated offender in LRAT testing for sexual assault. The findings showed that married female college students have lower risk of sexual assault victimization. However, if the sexual assault was not accurately measured due to hidden figure of sexual victimization or inappropriate interpretations of sexual victimization by the victims, the findings are difficult to be easily accepted. The second example is about other people’s participation during interviews. If parents take part in the interview about youth sexual victimization, it may interfere with the respondents’ frank answers. Thus, the measure of sexual victimization may have measurement error. As a result, the findings from LRAT testing that use the measure of sexual victimization as a dependent variable are difficult to be easily accepted. The third example is about wording of survey questions. In the survey Cass (2007) used, a question was “did someone force or coerce you to engage in unwanted sexual acts.” In the survey, there was no graphical behaviorally-specific explanation about penetration. Hence, the survey may underestimate sexual victimization. Hence, LRAT testing for sexual victimization by Cass (2007) is hard to be accepted.

The fourth example is about the definition of sexual victimization. As mentioned earlier, NISVS recognizes sexual victimization more broadly compared to NCVS. Thus, NISVS may have more sexual victimization reports. If a LRAT testing for sexual victimization uses NISVS data, the research may use overestimation of sexual victimization. In the case, the findings of the research are difficult to be easily accepted. The fifth example is about series victimization. As mentioned earlier, NCVS recognized 10 series victimization at maximum. Thus, NCVS may underestimate sexual victimization. If a LRAT testing for sexual victimization uses NCVS data, the research may use underestimation of sexual victimization. In this case, the findings of the research are difficult to be easily accepted. The sixth example is about survey contexts. As explained earlier, the organization conducting a survey and the name of the survey may influence measurement of sexual victimization. Hence, the contexts of a survey may cause underestimation or overestimation of sexual victimization. If a LRAT testing for sexual victimization uses the underestimated or overestimated survey, the findings are difficult to easily be accepted. The seventh example is about reference period. The reference period of Mustaine and Tewksbury’s research (2002) was sixth months whereas the reference period of Fisher et al.’s research (1998) was an academic year. People with few sexual victimization experiences may not have difficulty in remembering their victimization instances for a long period but people with many sexual victimizations may have difficulty. Thus, Fisher et al.’s survey using a little longer reference period may not accurately measure sexual victimization. Then the findings from their LRAT testing are difficult to be easily accepted. The final example is about ways to ask questions. Mustain and Tewksbury (2002) used one-stage to measure sexual victimization. Thus, there is no revision process for wrong sexual victimization information. As a result, in their research, sexual victimization may be overestimated. Then the findings from their LRAT testing are difficult to be easily accepted.

CONCLUSION

Same as other research, in LRAT testing for sexual victimization defining, operationalizing, and measuring theoretical concepts is very important. There are threats to validity and reliability to measure the theoretical key concepts. Also, there are threats to validity and reliability inherent in measurement of sexual victimization. These threats undermines the statistical testing of the explanatory and predictive powers of LRAT on sexual victimization.

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