

Participant Reactions to Questions about Gender-Based Sexual Violence:  
Implications for Campus Climate Surveys

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### **Abstract**

Gender-based sexual violence (GBSV) on college campuses has recently gained national attention in the United States. In April 2014, the White House recommended that institutions of higher education conduct campus climate surveys to assess GBSV; however, despite decades of research on this topic, concerns continue to be raised about the safety of asking participants about prior victimization. Do college students experience harm from participating in campus climate surveys? This article examines findings and implications of a recent study using data from a recent campus climate survey that was designed to assess students' reactions to participation and that was administered among undergraduates at a large public university. The survey questions were based on risk-benefit concepts at the heart of institutional review board deliberations: (1) Do GBSV-related questions cause distress?; (2) Are GBSV-related questions rated as important?; (3) Is asking about violence perceived as a good idea? The majority of students indicated that they did not find the survey more distressing than day-to-day life experiences, they evaluated the questions about sexual violence as important, and they indicated that, taking into account both risks and benefits, asking about sexual violence is a good idea. Race did not impact participants' reactions, while female gender affected slightly higher distress, and GBSV history impacted slightly more distress and greater perceived importance of the study; however, the practical significance of these small differences remains uncertain. Collectively, the study's findings can inform nationwide efforts in addressing GBSV on college campuses. The authors discuss limitations of the study and conclude with a consideration of directions for future research.

*Keywords:* campus climate surveys, trauma, gender-based sexual violence, universities

Gender-based sexual violence (GBSV) is any form of sexual assault—for example, unwanted touching, molestation, and attempted or completed oral, vaginal, or anal rape—in which victims are targeted, explicitly or implicitly, based on female gender. GBSV on U.S. college campuses is a long-standing public health concern. In 1987, Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski found that approximately 44% of female college students across 32 institutions reported experiencing some form of GBSV. Despite this long-standing empirical knowledge, rates of GBSV have remained high. Consistent with Koss and colleagues' (1987) early findings, a substantial proportion of female college students continues to experience GBSV (Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006; Ullman, Karabatsos, & Koss, 1999). Furthermore, institutional actions that fail to prevent or respond appropriately to GBSV—termed “institutional betrayal”—exacerbate anxiety, dissociation, and other impacts of GBSV among victimized female college students (Smith & Freyd, 2013, 2014). Universities and colleges thus have a pressing responsibility to assess and prevent GBSV and related institutional betrayal on their campuses. Fortunately, institutions of higher education are ideally positioned to use their power, status, and financial and educational resources to address GBSV.

With that in mind, the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault was formed in January 2014 (Obama, 2014) with the explicit goal of “[leading] an interagency effort to address campus rape and sexual assault, including coordinating Federal enforcement efforts by executive departments and agencies and helping institutions meet their obligations under Federal law” (p. 1). The task force’s first recommendation was for universities to conduct campus climate surveys to assess the prevalence of GBSV and the institutional and campus culture in which GBSV occurs (White House Task Force, 2014). Although systematic, large-scale research is needed to assess GBSV both within and across universities, institutions may be reluctant to ask students directly about GBSV given common fears and misconceptions regarding harm of inquiring about trauma history. Thus, assessing those concerns will help universities as they identify ways to implement campus climate surveys and other GBSV interventions within their respective institutions.

### **Outcomes of Asking About Trauma**

Common concerns regarding inquiring about experiences of trauma stem from misperceptions that such questions may themselves be harmful (Becker-

Blease & Freyd, 2006; Black & Black, 2007). These concerns include fears of upsetting and stigmatizing participants (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Black & Black, 2007), specifically abuse survivors, who may be viewed as too fragile to participate in trauma research studies (Griffin, Resick, Waldrop, & Mechanic, 2003). University institutional review boards (IRBs) may mirror society's tendency to silence abuse disclosure (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006) by creating unnecessary barriers to conducting trauma studies (Dalenberg, 2013). Misguided worries surrounding abuse survivors' perceived vulnerability directly contrasts the principle of respect for the autonomy of research participants (Black & Black, 2007). Indeed, autonomy and self-determination in sexual violence research are particularly important (Cook, Swartout, Goodnight, Hipp, & Bellis, 2015). Despite good intentions, such precautions may actually reinforce stigma around victimization (Ahrens, 2006; Fontes, 2004) by conveying that victims are too fragile (Cook et al., 2015) or vulnerable (Fontes, 2004). These concerns, though not new, are increasingly important to address because of the federal government's recommendations for universities to conduct campus climate surveys that examine the predictors, prevalence, and effects of GBSV, and that evaluate university effectiveness in addressing such violence (Obama, 2014). For many outside the field (e.g., university administrators and stakeholders), the question remains: Is asking about trauma harmful?

### **Goals of Gender-Based Sexual Violence Research**

“No problem can be solved unless we name it and know the extent of it,” wrote then-Senator Joe Biden in introducing the Violence Against Women Act 20 years ago. The line was repeated in an April 2014 White House report, with the observation, “That is especially true when it comes to campus sexual assault, which is chronically underreported” (White House Task Force, 2014).

One of the goals inherent in research on interpersonal violence is to promote social justice (Burstow, 2003; Gómez, under review), with research participation acting potentially as a form of intervention (Edwards, Sylaska, & Gidycz, 2014). As Herman (1997) maintained, aligning with perpetrators of violence and trauma can easily occur through inaction. Psychologically or behaviorally denying that interpersonal violence exists helps perpetuate a culture that condones violence. Asking about violence through research is a way to bear witness to the experience and resulting pain of trauma, while contributing knowledge that can lead to societal change. Therefore, while there is worry about

the distress incurred in being asked about trauma, Becker-Blease and Freyd (2006) noted the often unrecognized harm enacted by facilitating silence. In addition to inaccurately suggesting that risks of disclosure exceed those brought on by inhibiting disclosure (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006), excluding questions of trauma may result in erroneous or incomplete findings (Becker-Blease, Freyd, Russo, & Rich-Edwards, 2012; Edwards, Dube, Felitti, & Anda, 2007; Gleaves, Rucklidge, & Follette, 2007; Gómez, Becker-Blease, & Freyd, 2015) that communicate that abuse or reactions to abuse (e.g., drug use) are unimportant (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006).

### **Is Asking about Gender-Based Sexual Violence Harmful or Important?**

In addition to the societal implications of asking about GBSV, research consistently suggests that most participants do not feel re-traumatized by participating in trauma research (Jaffe, DiLillo, Hoffman, Haikalis, & Dykstra, 2015) and that such inquiry produces at worst only transitory distress (Cook et al., 2015) for a minority of participants (Carlson et al., 2003; Cromer, Freyd, Binder, DePrince, & Becker-Blease, 2006; Edwards, Probst, Tansill, & Gidycz, 2013; Newman, Walker, & Gefland, 1999; Ruzek & Zatzick, 2000; Walker, Newman, Koss, & Bernstein, 1997). For instance, in a large-scale phone survey by the CDC, more participants (15%) skipped items related to socioeconomic status than those who skipped interpersonal violence items (.25%) (Black, Kresnow, Arias, Simon, & Shelley, 2006). Similarly, in a study that included questions about childhood abuse (Edwards, Dube, Felitti, & Anda, 2007), participants were provided with the phone number to a hotline they could call if they were experiencing distress after the study. Within a 24-month period, none of the 30,000 participants called the hotline.

Although low levels of distress can only be inferred from these findings, other studies have measured distress directly. By the end of a study in which New Yorkers were interviewed after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, only 1% reported being distressed at the end of the interview (Galea et al., 2005). Additionally, in ethnically diverse samples of college students and community members, DePrince and Chu (2008) found that following the completion of a survey asking about interpersonal and non-interpersonal gender-based sexual violence, community members' average distress scores were not significantly different than neutral, and undergraduates' average distress scores were in fact lower than neutral.

Some studies have examined these findings using experimental methodology (Cook et al., 2011; Edwards, Kearns, Calhoun, & Gidycz, 2009; Ferrier-Averbach, Erbes, & Polusny, 2009; Legerski & Bunnell, 2010; Yeater, Miller, Rinehart, & Nason, 2012). After answering questions about trauma, individuals experience significantly lower negative affect than positive affect (Cook et al., 2011), with more positive affect (Yeater et al., 2012) and benefits (Edwards, Kearns, Calhoun, & Gidycz, 2009) being reported by those who answer questions about trauma compared to other research.

Yeater and colleagues (2012) used an experimental paradigm to compare reactions to trauma and sex surveys (containing approximately 300 questions) with tests of cognition. The vast majority of participants who completed the trauma and sex surveys did not report more negative affect than those who answered questions related to cognition (Yeater et al., 2012). Additionally, participants in the trauma-sex condition reported fewer mental costs than those in the cognition condition (Yeater et al., 2012). These findings are particularly powerful given that the researchers constructed a study that is much longer and more sexually explicit than most research that asks about trauma.

Other studies have examined the effect of trauma research participation longitudinally (Cook et al., 2015; Edwards et al., 2013). In a study that inquired about intimate partner violence, Edwards and colleagues (2013) found that a small percentage of participants reported negative emotional reactions at the end of the study (7.7%), with even fewer (2.1%) reporting such emotions after two months. Importantly, it was the trauma symptoms and not the trauma itself that predicted these negative emotions. In a longitudinal study that utilized an experimental paradigm, Cook and colleagues (2014) assigned participants from a racially and nationally diverse sample into conditions for sexual victimization questions and non-sexual items (traumatizing, stigmatizing, stressful, control). Compared with participants who were in the non-sexual conditions, people in the sexual victimization condition showed increases in positive affect over time at greater rates and reported fewer drawbacks to the research. Further, across conditions, there was no difference in negative affect or anxiety over time. There was also no difference in perceived ethical treatment of participants across conditions.

In addition to the majority of people reporting low levels of distress following answering questions about trauma (e.g., Carter-Visscher, Naugle, Bell, & Suvak, 2007; Jorm, Kelly, & Morgan, 2007; Newman & Kaloupek, 2004),

participants often have positive reactions after disclosing stressful events (King, 2001; Páez, Velasco, & Gonzales, 1999; Park & Blunberg, 2002; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Petrie, Booth, Pennebaker, Davison, & Thomas, 1995). With trauma research specifically, participants often report positive outcomes regarding the research itself and/or the research experience. For example, for the 37% of participants who reported that the questions about trauma were more distressing than every day events, nearly every participant (99%) rated the importance of trauma research as outweighing the relative distress they experienced (Cromer et al., 2006). Therefore, while answering questions about trauma may result in transitory distress for some (Cromer et al., 2006; Dalenberg, 2013; Yeater et al., 2012), almost all participants have reported this work as positive and/or important (Black et al., 2006; Carlson et al., 2003; Cromer et al., 2006; DePrince & Freyd, 2006; Dyregov, Dyregov, & Raundalen, 2000; Griffin et al., 2003; Newman et al., 1999; Ruzek & Zatzick, 2000; Yeater et al., 2012).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The prevalence of GBSV on college campuses (e.g., Gross et al., 2006) has gained greater acknowledgment, such that addressing such violence has become a national priority (Obama, 2014). Campus climate surveys comprise one recommended mechanism for colleges and universities to assess the depth and breadth of GBSV on their own campuses, while comparing their findings across the larger university community (White House Task Force, 2014). With this increased attention, the importance of demonstrating that asking about GBSV is not harmful is two-fold: (a) As GBSV research expands to include larger college samples, the importance of not doing harm is paramount; (b) educating university administrators, IRBs, stakeholders, researchers, students, the community, and society at large that GBSV research is not harmful can facilitate the implementation of campus climate surveys (Obama, 2014) by trained researchers. These reasons are important for both research and advocacy efforts; in demonstrating that participating in GBSV studies specifically is not harmful, researchers should be able to conduct studies with less resistance from the aforementioned groups, thus contributing to the empirical base of trauma psychology while concurrently informing advocacy efforts to address GBSV on college campuses.

Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine the potential harm and importance of asking about GBSV in one of the first campus climate

surveys following federal recommendations. To accomplish this, we posed three simple questions: (a) Risk—Is answering questions about GBSV harmful, as measured by levels of reported distress?; (b) benefit—Do students rate empirical inquiry about GBSV as important?; (c) risk-benefit analysis—Is asking about GBSV a good idea? To increase the applicability of our findings to diverse populations, we further wanted to examine if student reactions to the GBSV items varied by gender—given that females are disproportionately affected by interpersonal trauma (e.g., DePrince & Freyd, 2002; Goldberg & Freyd, 2006)—and race—given that this work is needed around ethnic minority samples (e.g., Cromer et al., 2006). Finally, because a primary concern regarding trauma research is that it may harm people who previously have been victimized due to their presumed fragility (Griffin et al., 2003), we explored if GBSV history affected student reactions to the survey. Thus, we hope that the current study's findings will inform efforts to address multiple concerns related to the ethics of implementing campus climate surveys.

## Method

### Participants

In order to participate in the study, students were required to be at least 18 years of age, to have enrolled in the upcoming academic term, and to have been enrolled during the previous term. From the Office of the Registrar, we obtained the university email addresses of 5,000 randomly selected students who met these criteria. Following their receipt of an invitation via email, 1,058 students completed at least some portion of the survey (female: 66.3%; male: 32.9%). Students who incorrectly answered two or more quality assurance items were excluded from analyses. The final sample size was  $N = 899$ . Of this total, 66.1% of the participants were female, 33% male, 1.4% gender queer/gender non-conforming, and 0.2% transgender. The percentages add up to more than 100% because participants could check more than one gender (e.g., female and transgender). Due to the small number of transgender participants ( $N = 2$ ), we excluded these data from the analyses in which gender was the independent variable. Ages ranged from 18 years to 51 years ( $M = 21.20$  years;  $SD = 3.41$ ). Of the total sample, 27.4% of students reported experiencing some form of sexual violence in college. For women, 35.4% reported having experienced GBSV while in college.



The sample identified mostly as White/Caucasian (84.2%), followed by Asian/Asian American (11.5%), Hispanic/Latino/a (8%), Black/African American (3.1%), Native American/Alaska Native (1.7%), and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1.7%); 0.3% declined to answer. The percentages add up to more than 100% because participants were able to check more than one ethnic group. For our analyses, we separated “race” into seven categories: Asian/Asian American, Black/African American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino/a, Native American/Alaska Native, White/Caucasian, and other.

### **Procedure**

Following the initial email invitation, students had 10 days to participate in the online survey. They received a reminder email about the study five days after the initial email invitation. In order to participate, students clicked the hyperlink in the email message that directed them to an online Qualtrics survey. After consenting to participate, students completed the 30-minute online survey, received the debriefing form, and were given instructions on how to receive a \$20 gift card to Amazon.com for their participation.

### **Measures**

Many measures were used in the complete climate campus survey (Freyd, Rosenthal, & Smith, 2014); however, only those that are relevant to the current study are described here. To screen for sexual violence in college, we modified seven items from the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss et al., 2007). These items assess for unwanted sexual contact during college, including contact molestation (e.g., fondling), attempted or completed oral contact, and attempted or completed rape (vaginal or anal). Sample items included: “Someone fondled, kissed, or rubbed up against the private areas of my body (lips, breast/chest, crotch or butt) or removed some of my clothes without my consent (but did not attempt sexual penetration)”; “Even though it didn’t happen, someone TRIED to insert their penis, fingers, or objects into my vagina without my consent”; “Someone inserted their penis, fingers, or objects into my anus without my consent.” We coded the variable as dichotomous, with “1” indicating GBSV history (endorsement of at least one experience of non-consensual sexual contact while in college) and “0” indicating no GBSV history (none of these experiences were reported).

To measure students’ attitudes toward the study, we adapted three multiple-choice questions from DePrince and Freyd (2006). The first item

assessed risk, inquiring about distress: “For the questions that were asked about different experiences you may have had such as non-consensual sexual experiences or touching someone without their consent, please rate whether you found answering these questions to be more or less distressing than other things you sometimes encounter in day to day life.” Response options ranged from 1 (much more distressing) to 5 (much less distressing) on a Likert scale. The second item assessed benefit, inquiring about the importance of GBSV research: “For the questions that were asked about different experiences you may have had such as non-consensual sexual experiences or touching someone without their consent, please rate how important you believe it is for researchers to ask about these types of events in order to study the impact of such experiences.” Response options ranged from 1 (definitely not important) to 5 (definitely important) on a Likert scale. The final item assessed risk-benefit analysis, asking if it was a good or bad idea to include trauma-related measures in research: “For the questions that were asked about different experiences you may have had such as non-consensual sexual experiences or touching someone without their consent, please consider both your experience answering the questions, and your feelings about how important it is we ask the questions, and then rate how good of an idea it is to include such measures in research.” Likert responses ranged from 1 (very bad) to 5 (very good).

### **Results**

The purpose of the current study was to answer three key questions regarding participants’ overall reactions to the campus climate survey: (a) Risk—Did they find answering questions about GBSV more distressing than day-to-day occurrences?; (b) benefit—Did they think it was important for researchers to ask about GBSV?; (c) risk-benefit analysis—Is asking about GBSV a good idea? For the total sample, the majority of students (72.3%) rated the survey as neutral (56.7%), somewhat less distressing (6.5%), or much less distressing (9.1%) compared to day-to-day experiences (Figure 1). The majority of students (82.8%) rated these questions as either somewhat important (17.8%) or definitely important (65%; Figure 2). Finally, only approximately 1% of the total sample reported that asking these questions was a somewhat bad or very bad idea to include in research measures (Figure 3).

Additionally, we compared these results across gender, race, and GBSV history (Table 1). We ran ANOVAs to determine if gender, race, or history of

GBSV had an effect on reports of distress (risk), importance of the study (benefit), and whether conducting this research was perceived as a good or bad idea (risk-benefit analysis). Gender and GBSV history affected some participant reactions to GBSV-related items, whereas race did not.

There was a significant effect of gender (female, male, gender queer/non-conforming) on distress,  $F(2, 886) = 6.89, p = .001, \eta^2 = .02$ , with Bonferroni post hoc analyses ( $M_D = -.24, p = .001$ ) showing that on average, women ( $M = 2.87, SD = .87$ ) reported these items as slightly more distressing than men ( $M = 3.11, SD = .92$ ). Conversely, there was not a significant effect of gender on rated importance of GBSV-related items,  $F(2, 887) = 3.06, p = .05, \eta^2 = .01$ . However, there was an effect of gender on appraisal of whether this research was perceived as a good idea or bad idea,  $F(2, 885) = 3.32, p = .04, \eta^2 = .01$ . Bonferroni post hoc analyses indicated no significant differences between individual genders.

Unlike gender, there was not a significant effect of race (Asian/Asian American, Black/African American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino/a, Native American/Alaska Native, White/Caucasian, and other) on reports of distress,  $F(6, 882) = .98, p = .44, \eta^2 = .01$ , rated importance of the study,  $F(6, 883) = .62, p = .72, \eta^2 = .01$ , or whether this research was perceived as a good idea,  $F(6, 881) = 1.90, p = .08, \eta^2 = .01$ .

Finally, there was a significant effect of GBSV history (at least one experience of GBSV vs. no reported experience of GBSV) on reports of distress,  $F(1, 890) = 16.70, p = .00, \eta^2 = .02$ , with those who endorsed any GBSV history reporting, on average, slightly more distress ( $M = 2.75, SD = .92$ ) than those who did not report any such experiences ( $M = 3.02, SD = .87$ ). Similarly, GBSV history also impacted rated importance of the study,  $F(1, 891) = 5.93, p = .02, \eta^2 = .01$ , with those who endorsed any GBSV history rating the study, on average, as more important ( $M = 4.56, SD = .77$ ) than those who did not report this history ( $M = 4.40, SD = .90$ ). Lastly, there was not a significant impact of GBSV history on whether this research was perceived as a good idea,  $F(1, 889) = .47, p = .49, \eta^2 = .00$ .

In conclusion, generally, gender, race, and GBSV history did not significantly impact participants' reactions to responding to GBSV-related items. The exceptions to this were: gender's impact on reported level of distress and the impact of GBSV history on distress and importance of the GBSV-related items. It

is important to note, however, that although the aforementioned tests were statistically significant, the small effect sizes indicate that these differences may be of little clinical or practical significance.

### **Discussion**

With gender-based sexual violence on campuses gaining national attention in recent years, one recommendation in addressing GBSV has been to implement campus climate surveys that will assess the scope of the problem within and across universities (Obama, 2014). As higher education institutions grapple with the prospect of conducting such campus-wide surveys, fears about the appropriateness, potential for harm, and benefit of asking about trauma (e.g., Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006) are likely to arise.

Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to utilize data from one of the first campus climate surveys to assess if asking about GBSV is harmful—measuring risk by posing questions about levels of distress, benefit through inquiring about the importance of GBSV research, and risk-benefit analysis by asking if GBSV research is a good idea. We found that the majority of students did not find answering questions about GBSV more distressing than occurrences in day-to-day life; additionally, most participants indicated that research on GBSV is important and is a good idea to include in research. Thus, our findings reinforce earlier evidence that the benefits of GBSV research far outweigh the minimal risks (e.g., Cromer et al., 2006).

To understand how GBSV-related questions affect individuals, we explored if these responses varied by gender, race, and GBSV history. Our findings did not vary as a function of race. Gender did have a statistically significant effect on reported levels of distress; however, this effect was minimal, with women's score just below neutral (toward rating the items as somewhat more distressing than occurrences in every day life) and men's scores just above neutral (toward indicating the items were somewhat less distressing than experiences of everyday life). Further, those who indicated a GBSV history in college did, on average, report being slightly more distressed by the items and rated these as items as more important than their counterparts who did not indicate this history. These differences again were negligible (see Table 1) and thus may carry minimal practical significance.

With a specific focus on GBSV-related items, findings from the current study expand previous research that suggests that inquiring about trauma is not harmful (e.g., Carter-Visscher et al., 2007; Cook et al., 2011; Cook et al., 2015; Edwards et al., 2013; Galea et al., 2005; Jaffe et al., 2015; Jorm et al., 2007; Newman & Kaloupek, 2004; Yeater et al., 2012). Further in line with past research, we found that participants judged asking these questions in a research context as valuable (Black et al., 2006; Carlson et al., 2003; Cromer et al., 2006; DePrince & Freyd, 2006; Dyregov et al., 2000; Griffin et al., 2003; Newman et al., 1999; Ruzek & Zatzick, 2000; Yeater et al., 2012), with those who indicated a GBSV history rating these items as slightly more important than those who did not. In line with current research (e.g., Jaffe et al., 2015), we found that on average those who reported having experienced GBSV in college reported experiencing minimal distress that was only slightly higher than other participants. Therefore, our findings contradict the popular belief that trauma survivors are weak and may be easily harmed by questions about trauma (e.g., Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006). This finding further supports that asking an individual about her or his history of trauma, even someone who has experienced such trauma, is not harmful (e.g., Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Edwards et al., 2007; Ullman, 2007).

Our findings differed in one important way from those reported in some of the literature. Some earlier research indicates that people who have not experienced violence tend to object to trauma-related questions more than those with trauma histories (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Gielen et al., 2000). Becker-Blease and Freyd (2006) posited that this might be a consequence of societal reluctance to bear witness to the prevalence and severity of trauma; they also suggested that such silencing negatively impacts trauma survivors. Nevertheless, in the current study, we found no difference in rated importance of trauma research between those who reported college GBSV and those who did not. Our findings could stem from the general youth of our population. Over the last 30 years, society has become increasingly aware of sexual violence across the lifespan; college students may be at an ideal stage in their development to benefit from this awareness, thus generally rejecting silence around GBSV. Moreover, college students exist in an environment where GBSV is common; while not all of our participants had experienced GBSV first-hand, many may have been secondarily impacted by GBSV, which could additionally explain their support of this research.

### **Methodological Limitations and Future Directions**

While the current study has implications for research on GBSV and implementing campus climate surveys, there are also several limitations that future studies should address.

Researchers have discussed the need for more racially diverse samples to assess for any differences in responses to GBSV-related questions (e.g., Cromer et al., 2006; DePrince & Chu, 2006; DePrince & Freyd, 2006). In the current study, we examined reactions to GBSV-related research across majority and minority races; thus, the implications for campus climate surveys nationally are not relevant for White/Caucasian students alone. Nevertheless, the majority of our sample identified as White/Caucasian. Instead of collecting data from a representative sample, future studies should over-sample ethnic minorities. Doing so would help to make future campus climate surveys more applicable to all university students, including those who are underrepresented at predominantly White universities.

Additionally, invitations for participation occurred over the summer through university emails. The majority of students did not click the link to go to the study's webpage; it is probable that at least some students were not checking their university email over the academic break and therefore did not receive the invitations to participate in a timely fashion. Therefore, while we utilized random sampling techniques, there is likely a systematic difference between some of the students who participated and some of those who did not. These unknown group differences may have affected our findings to some extent.

Finally, the current study assessed an immediate reaction to research questions and did not probe for long-lasting costs or benefits. Given that disclosure of trauma with a perceived supportive response (e.g., Ullman, 2007) or no response (e.g., through a journal entry; Pennebaker et al., 1988) can be beneficial, future studies should explicitly assess both the short- and long-term benefits of disclosing trauma, including GBSV, in a survey.

### **Expertise in Trauma Research: The Devil is in the Details**

The current study suggests that there is no evidence that empirical inquiry by trauma researchers about GBSV on college campuses will cause harm to participants. However, this does not mean that all surveys of GBSV are necessarily safe. The harm or safety of a survey depends on many details. The Association for American Universities (AAU) has invited its member universities

to employ the organization in implementing campus climate surveys (Toiv, 2014). Yet over 50 experts in trauma research have publicly opposed AAU's involvement in such an instrument (Allard et al., 2014), citing that "good survey content requires that a range of experts with specialized academic expertise in assessing these sensitive issues be engaged" (p. 1). Allard and colleagues (2014) further reference the White House Task Force toolkit, which voices similar concerns about how campus climate surveys that are constructed and implemented without the benefit of research expertise can not only provide false findings but also undermine campus work to address sexual violence. Freyd (2014b) adds that because of the stigmatization and confusion around GBSV, researchers have perfected the way in which they probe about these experiences, including using behaviorally specific questions to ask about GBSV (Fisher, 2009). Likely resulting from these and other concerns, over two dozen AAU universities declined to participate in the AAU survey, including Stanford University, Boston University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Stratford, 2015).

Data from the existing literature (e.g., Jaffe et al., 2015) and the current study provide evidence that, with the proper experience and expertise, inquiring about GBSV at a campus-wide level is not harmful to those who participate. Thus, universities, stakeholders, communities, students, and the broader society can be relatively confident in the process and results of campus climate surveys that utilize expertise in trauma research. These surveys are extremely valuable given that underreporting of GBSV is normative and that universities with lower reported rates of GBSV may be better at discouraging reporting (Freyd, 2014a).

One option in utilizing trauma research expertise is through the Madison Summit for Campus Climate and Sexual Misconduct (2015), which gathered 22 experts in the field to produce an open-source, student-focused campus climate survey that can have implications in addressing, preventing, and intervening on GBSV. This survey, due for public use in the fall of 2015, will utilize some of the procedures and measures from the current study.

In conclusion, not utilizing the body of research in the field could result in invalidating students' experiences and underestimating rates of sexual violence, thus thwarting the efficacy of prevention and intervention programs that stem from campus climate survey findings. Therefore, regardless of the specific avenue that universities choose in administering campus climate surveys, care should be taken in utilizing state-of-the-art expertise in the field to conduct campus climate

surveys that ultimately benefit students by gathering empirical information about GBSV in a way that is not harmful to students.

### **Implications**

There are several implications of the current study. Given the recommendations from the White House regarding addressing sexual violence on college campuses (Obama, 2014), universities are in time-pressured positions to conduct campus climate surveys to assess the depth and breadth of in-house sexual violence. Our results from the current campus climate survey have implications for informing university officials about the feasibility, practicality, appropriateness, and importance of doing such work. Not only are students with and without GBSV histories unlikely to be harmed by GBSV-related questions, they also are supportive of such work. Therefore, the current study provides evidence to refute fears around inquiring about trauma (e.g., Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2007).

Finally, universities have a pivotal role in either reducing GBSV or contributing to its prevalence and harm. Actions or inactions that promote or fail to prevent or respond appropriately to GBSV are forms of institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014), which is related to exacerbated harm of GBSV (Smith & Freyd, 2013). Assessment is the first step in reducing institutional betrayal (Freyd, 2014a; Freyd & Birrell, 2013; Gómez & Freyd, 2014; Gómez, Smith, & Freyd, 2014), as it allows individuals the opportunity to voice problems within organizations (Pope, 2015). Thus, campus climate surveys can reduce institutional betrayal and the associated harm by gathering information about GBSV that is then used to influence prevention and intervention efforts that benefit both individuals and university culture.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from the current study are in line with prior research indicating that empirical inquiry about gender-based sexual violence is not inherently harmful when conducted by researchers with expertise in trauma. Furthermore, students value this research, as most rate the work as important. Findings from this campus climate survey can inform nationwide efforts in addressing GBSV on college campuses. It is through this honest investigation of abuse that we can learn ways to foster safe, violence-free campuses.



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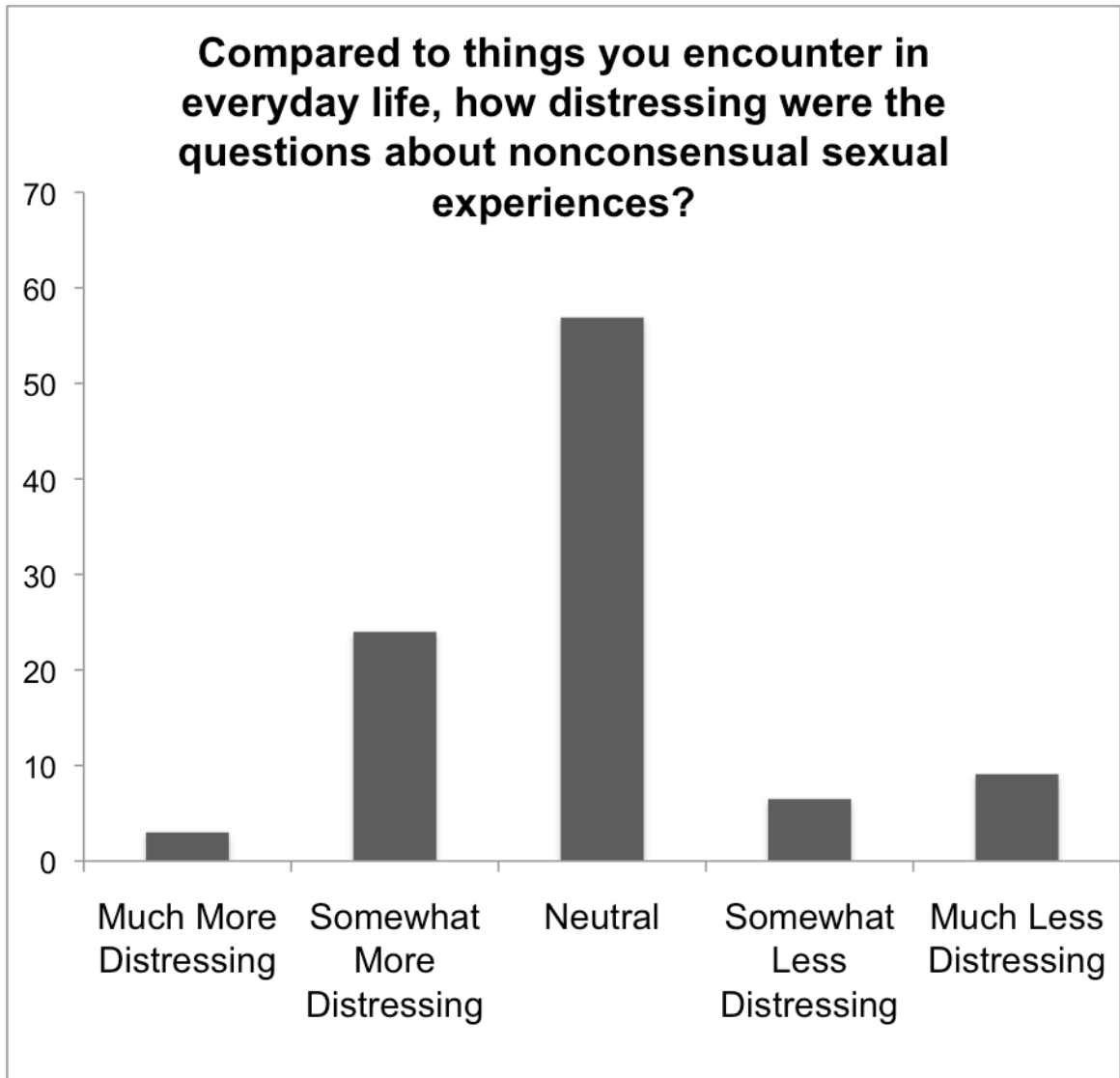
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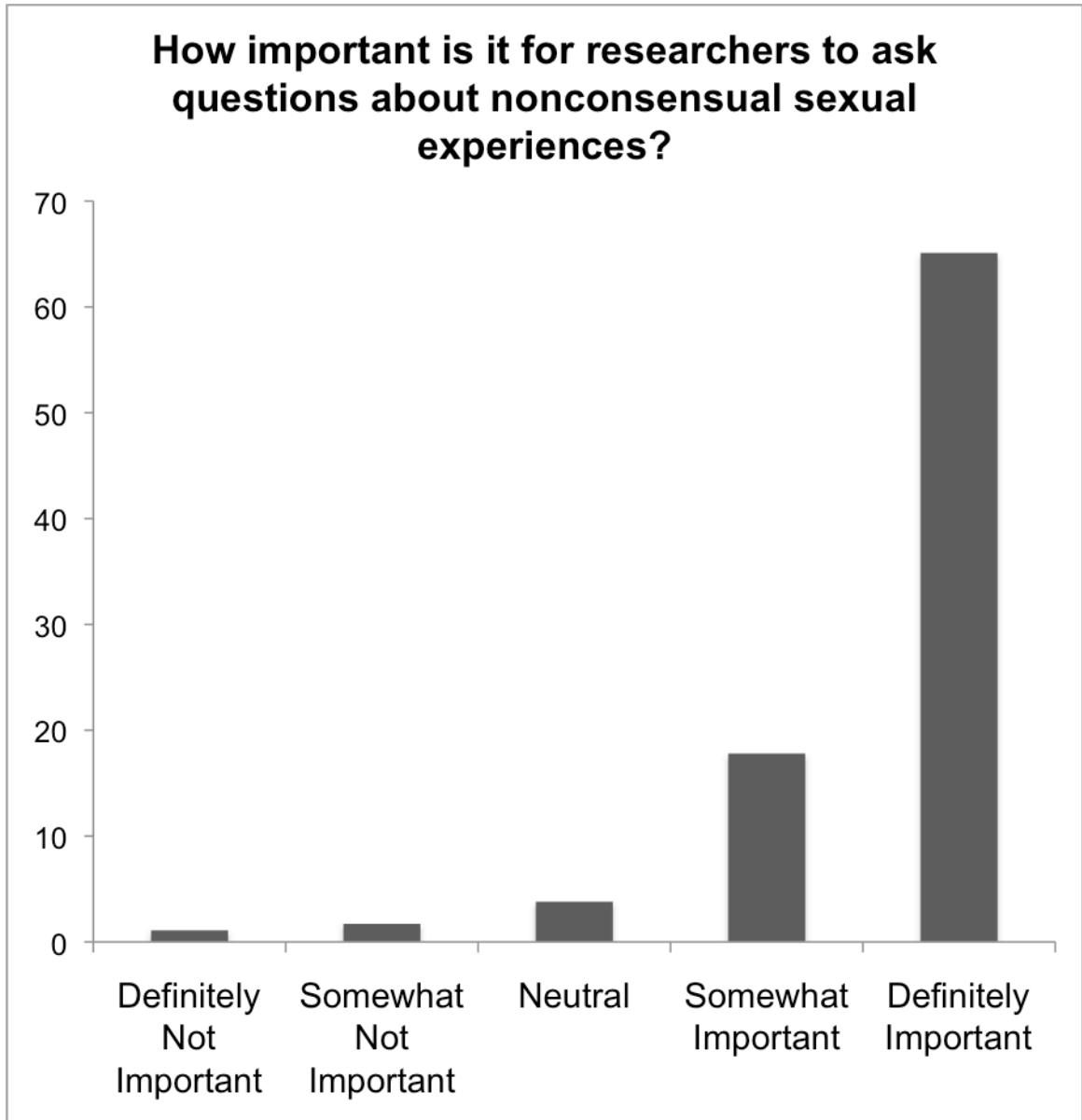
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Appendix  
Figures and Tables

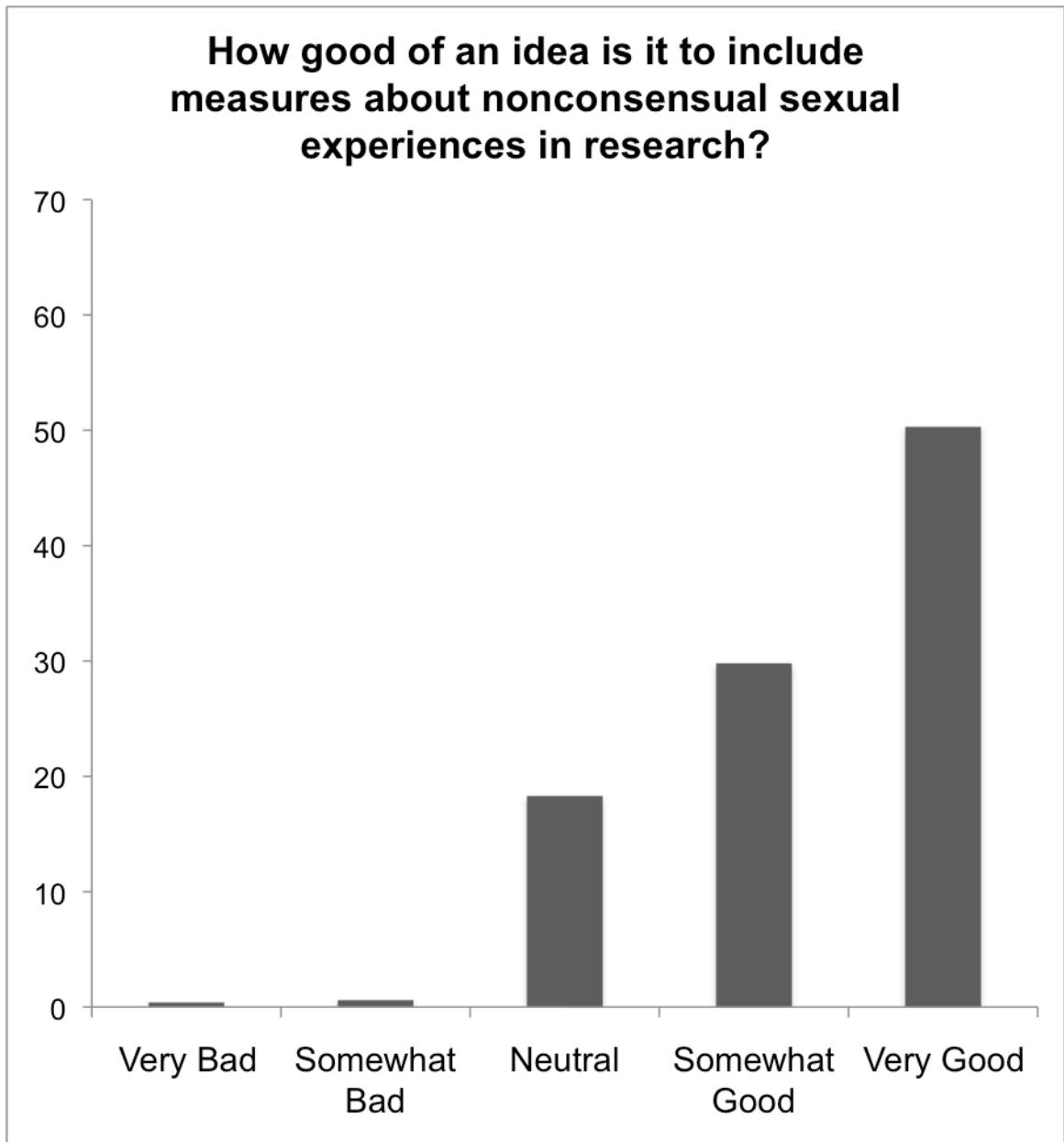


*Figure 1.* Risk: The overwhelming majority of students did not find GBSV-related questions much more distressing than what they encounter in everyday life. Note: Y-axis values represent percentages.



*Figure 2.* Benefit: The vast majority of university students reported that asking GBSV-related questions in research is important. Note: Y-axis values represent percentages.





*Figure 3.* Risk-benefit analysis: Less than one percent of participants reported that asking about GBSV is a somewhat bad or very bad idea. Note: Y-axis values represent percentages.

Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations for Participant Reactions to GBSV-Related Items, Separated by Gender, Race, and GBSV History*

	<b>Distress</b>	<b>Importance</b>	<b>Good Idea</b>
<b>Total</b>	2.95 (.89)	4.45 (.87)	4.30 (.82)
<b>Gender</b>			
Women	2.87 (.87)	4.49 (.84)	4.32 (.80)
Men	3.11 (.92)	4.36 (.93)	4.23 (.85)
Gender Queer/Non-Conforming	2.92 (1.19)	4.77 (.60)	4.77 (.44)
<b>Race</b>			
Asian/Asian American	2.98 (.93)	4.36 (.92)	4.17 (.93)
Black/African American	3.14 (1.08)	4.54 (.84)	4.21 (.79)
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	3.20 (.94)	4.27 (1.03)	4.27 (.96)
Hispanic/Latino/a	2.96 (.85)	4.56 (.73)	4.35 (.74)
Native American/Alaska Native	2.94 (.94)	4.67 (.59)	4.33 (.77)
White/Caucasian	2.93 (.88)	4.45 (.88)	4.33 (.80)
<b>GBSV History</b>			
GBSV History	2.75 (.93)	4.56 (.77)	3.91 (6.65)
No GBSV History	2.24 (8.95)	3.77 (8.13)	3.49 (9.01)

*Note.* M (SD). In the same construct (e.g., gender and distress), italicized items are significantly different from one another.

### Author Biographies



Jennifer M. Gómez, M.S., is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at the University of Oregon, researching the effects of interpersonal and institutional betrayal trauma. She is the co-editor to the special issue of *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation, Self Injury & Suicidality: The Impact of Trauma & Dissociation*. She has proposed cultural betrayal trauma theory as a way to examine and understand interpersonal trauma outcomes for cultural minorities, with a specific interest on Black Americans. She is dedicated to contributing culturally relevant work that informs trauma research with clinical applications. Gómez can be reached at [jgomez@uoregon.edu](mailto:jgomez@uoregon.edu).



Carly P. Smith, M.A. (Wake Forest University, 2010), M.S. (University of Oregon, 2011) is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at the University of Oregon. Her research, conducted in collaboration with Dr. Jennifer Freyd, has focused on the form and impact of institutional betrayal in educational and healthcare settings. Smith can be reached at [carlys@uoregon.edu](mailto:carlys@uoregon.edu).



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