Methods for Assessing Attitudes toward Intimate Partner Violence in Rural Bangladesh

Sidney Ruth Schuler and Kathryn Yount

Abstract
This paper presents preliminary qualitative findings from a project to develop better methodological tools to understand women's and men's attitudes about intimate partner violence (IPV) in rural Bangladesh and their perceptions of norms about IPV in their communities. In-depth cognitive interviews with men and women are used to explore subjective understandings of standard survey questions that are meant to elicit individual attitudes about IPV. Findings suggest that additional context should be incorporated into questions on IPV attitudes to make responses to them more meaningful. The findings also suggest that most people in this social context believe that wife beating is justified under some circumstances, but also believe that it often goes beyond socially sanctioned limits and that something should be done to stop it.

Background
Despite the high levels of Intimate partner violence (IPV) globally and their documented consequences, researchers only recently have developed standard instruments to measure individual attitudes and community-level norms about IPV in poor settings. Surveys such as the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) (ORC MACRO 2006) increasingly include questions intended to capture individuals' attitudes about IPV, as well its prevalence and forms. To date, the DHS have collected data on IPV in 24 countries. The questions on attitudes about IPV ask women/men of reproductive age (WRA, 18 – 49 years) to report whether they agree or disagree wife abuse is justified for any of a pre-specified list of scenarios. An analysis of surveys conducted in several countries (Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Haiti, India, Nicaragua, and Zambia) finds that between 11% and 94% of ever-abused WRA agree with at least one reason justifying wife abuse, and that between 9% and 86% of never-abused WRA report that they agree with at least one reason justifying such abuse (Kishor and Johnston 2004).

Although individual and community perceptions of IPV are potentially important correlates for changing this practice, our understanding of them cross-culturally may be limited by weaknesses in the commonly used attitudinal survey questions about IPV, which may, for example, conflate women's perceptions of IPV with their perceptions of norms about IPV in their communities (Schuler et al. 2007). Research has also found that survey questions related to gender issues such as sexual assault and spousal physical violence, may "not have the same cognitive or semantic meanings to men and women" (Ghuman et al. 2006).

Given the high prevalence of IPV against women, the high reported levels of acceptance of IPV, and the potential significance of anti-IPV attitudes for reducing women's risk of experiencing IPV, it is important to understand the meanings and interpretations respondents attach to attitudinal questions on intimate partner violence. This paper presents preliminary qualitative findings from a project to generate a more nuanced

understanding of what survey respondents mean when they say that men's violence against their wives is justified, and to develop better methodological tools to understand women's and men's attitudes about IPV in surveys and their perceptions of norms about IPV in their communities.

Setting

Bangladesh is notable for its high reported levels of IPV (estimates from six rural surveys range from 32% to 72% of married women ever experiencing IPV. This setting also is a well-established research site, where a rich body of existing data has been collected since 1991. Our research sites are six villages where members of the current research team have been working for several years. Although not randomly selected, the six villages and the districts in which they are located do not stand out within the rural Bangladesh context.

Methods

The results presented in this paper are based on cognitive interviews (CIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with women and men. Cognitive interviewing is a technique to understand the cognitive processes that underlie survey report errors (Ericsson and Simon 1980; 1984; Willis 1999). Operationally, the technique of cognitive interviewing may include two related, but procedurally different activities, 1) a "think-aloud" activity and 2) intensive probing. In the former activity, study participants are encouraged to verbalize their thoughts as they answer the survey questions. In the latter activity, the interviewer uses pre-planned and/or spontaneous verbal probes to make explicit the cognitive processes that occur with the survey question(s) of interest.

In this study, we used "think-aloud" and "intensive probing" activities in CIs with women and men to expose the cognitive processes that underlie their responses to questions about attitudes toward IPV. Three sets of CIs were conducted privately by same-sex interviewers. A first set of 27 CIs with women and 25 with men elicited the cognitive processes that underlie men's and women's responses to standard questions about attitudes toward IPV that have been used in the 2004 and 2007 Bangladesh DHS.

We started with a version of the basic DHS questions[1], which roughly translate as follows: It is normal for a couple to have quarrels and disagreements. During these quarrels some husbands occasionally severely reprimand or even beat their wives. In your opinion, do you think a man would be justified to beat his wife:

If she neglects the children?
If she argues with her husband?
If she fails to provide food on time?
If she visits her family or friend without her husband's permission?

[1] These have varied somewhat over time and from country to country. In the first set of CIs we used the 2004 questions from the Bangladesh DHS. In the second set we added two additional scenarios ("refuses to have sex with her husband" and "does not obey elders in the family") from the 2007 Bangladesh DHS. In the third set we used the 2007 Bangladesh scenarios (same as in the second set but with "goes out without telling the husband" substituted for "visits her family of friend without her husband's permission").

Study participants were asked to verbalize their understandings of the overall question and words within the question, as well as the reasons for their chosen response. They were asked about their own attitudes, about prevailing attitudes in their community, and whether if others, such as elders or religious leaders said wife beating was right or wrong, they would agree, and how they personally would feel if they had beaten their wife (or, for female study participants, how they personally would feel about being beaten) in a particular situation. The interviewers also asked spontaneous and pre-prepared questions to probe these matters further.

Based on the responses in the first set of interviews, new questions were developed to explore how responses to the basic DHS-type questions might differ if additional contexts were provided. A second set of CIs then was conducted with 20 women and 24 men using these new questions. Here, in addition to own attitudes and community attitudes we asked about attitudes of family members, and at the end of the interview we asked whether the person thought anything should be done to stop husbands' violence against their wives and, if so, what. In a third set of CIs with women only (12), we asked the same questions and also explored who study participants were referring to when they spoke about community attitudes, and who pays attention to and gossips about what others do. Four FGDs (one each with women and men in each of the two villages) were also conducted using the same interview guide that was used for individuals in the second set of CIs. The FGDs provided an opportunity to explore the possibility that women/men are more/less likely to appear to condone IPV in a group setting.

The interviews were conducted face to face by experienced, well-trained interviewers of the same sex as the study participant, usually in the person's home but outside if necessary to ensure privacy. The interviewers were trained to change the subject or terminate the interview if another person appeared during an interview. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English. Thematic coding was done using the software program MAXQDA. Whole interviews were also examined to look for patterns within interviews. Responses to some of the questions were tabulated to explore patterns across interviews.

The paper presents and discusses the following findings:

Simple misunderstandings of questions

Only one question was misunderstood by significant numbers of study participants. Apparently, these individuals did not always listen carefully to every word in each sentence. Rather, when they heard certain words they jumped to conclusions about what we were asking. Asked, "Is it right for a husband to beat his wife if neglects his children, one of the men replied, "You have to make the kids understand. My wife and I, we do not beat our kids. They obey us. They listen to us." A woman was asked, "Why do you think it is not right for a husband to beat his wife if she neglects her children?" She responded, "Children can make mistakes. But do you have to beat them for that? No, it would not be right to beat them." At least on a superficial level, other items seem to have been understood as intended. Moreover, when asked at the end of the interview whether it had

been easy or difficult to answer the questions, most participants said it had been easy.

Consistency

In the first set of interviews, the series of questions about specific scenarios was preceded by a general question: "It is normal for a couple to have quarrels and disagreements. During these quarrels some husbands occasionally severely reprimand or even beat their wives. In your opinion, do you think a man is justified in beating his wife?" Most of the study participants answered no to this question (21/27 of the women and 23/25 of the men). When the specific scenarios were given, as in the DHS, a significant proportion of the men changed their responses to "yes", but most women continued to say no, it would not be justified. The exception was the final scenario, "if she visits her family or friend without her husband's permission", in which 13/27 of the women and 14/25 of the men said "yes" or "it depends".

During the course of the interview, between 4 and 11 of the 27 women changed their responses to the various scenario questions at least once. The men were much more consistent, with only one changing his response for any scenario, and in each case this was from "not justified" to "it depends". A possible interpretation is that men in this society tend to be much more sure of what they think is right, or that women feel ambivalent about holding beliefs that they see as inconsistent with community norms, or they subscribe to what they believe the norms are on one level but still feel wronged when they themselves are beaten, and so they waver in their responses.

In the second and third sets of interviews, after the initial questions study participants were presented with pairs of more detailed scenarios. These were constructed on the basis of remarks made during the first set of interviews, which suggested that the vast majority of study participants did in fact condone wife beating if they perceived the woman to be at fault. The detailed scenarios were meant to tap into prevalent ideas regarding when women were or were not at fault. For example.....add one pair of scenarios here. When presented with these scenarios, the vast majority, in effect, changed their responses from yes or no to "it depends".

Own vs. community and family attitudes

On average, both men and women saw others in the community as more likely than themselves to condone wife beating, but most men described the community's attitudes as identical to their own and most women described their community as more apt to condone IPV than they themselves were. Among the 27 women in an initial set of 52 interviews analyzed, an average of 4 said men were justified in beating their wives across different scenarios, and an average of 10 said people in their community thought it was justified. This compares with an average of about 6 among 25 men who said wife beating was justified in the various scenarios and about 9 who said others in the community would think so. The scenario in which wife beating was most often condoned was "visits her family or friend without her husband's permission." 11/27 of the women initially said the man would be justified in beating his wife in this case and 19/27 said others in the community thought so. In addition, there were some who said it would depend on the specific circumstances.

The finding that, compared with the women, the men saw community attitudes as closer to their own could reflect a sense among both men and women that community norms mainly reflect men's views. It could also mean that men are more conformist in their attitudes than women are, and that their own attitudes therefore tend to reflect their perception of community norms rather than vice versa. And it may reflect a situation in which many women see IPV as wrong under most circumstances and perceive community norms to work against them.

In some cases when women were asked whether beating was justified in a particular circumstance, instead of saying it was right or justified they said something like: "well of course the man would beat his wife in that situation," as if the relevant point was what men would actually do, not whether it was right.

A few of the women said, in effect, that their own opinions about the moral significance of IPV were meaningless given the realities of gender inequality in their local society and their marriages. These women seemed to believe that what is "right" is determined by the society not by their own inner sense of morality.

Context

More detail is needed to give a meaningful reply or, “It is right hypothetically but wrong in my own case.” This was probably the most common source of misunderstanding we found in the interviews. The particular images in the person’s mind influenced whether they said it was wrong or right for the husband to beat his wife. When they thought of a hypothetical situation where they considered the woman to be at fault, they said beating was acceptable, but many of the women who said “no it is not right for the husband to beat” assumed there were attenuating circumstances. For example, when they thought about neglecting the children or failing to serve a meal on time they assumed this was due to the unusual pressure of work on that day, or imagined the woman in question might suddenly have to go to a relative’s house without informing the husband because of an emergency. In contrast, some study participants assumed the woman had no good reason for the four behaviors listed. And most, in fact, whether they had initially said yes or no to the questions, did see it as justified when they considered the woman to be at fault. In some cases statements about whether beating was right or wrong switched during the interview, apparently because the context that came to mind shifted.

“Unthinkability”

Quite a number of the women and a few men first replied as if they thought the question was nonsensical, mainly to the question about neglecting the children. A common response was: “a woman would never neglect her children.”

Moreover, the women we interviewed generally assumed the questions applied to them personally. The reasoning behind their answers can be summed up as follows:

- Respondent’s attitude: It’s right to beat but only when the wife is at fault
- Assumptions:
    - I am never at fault because I try hard not to be

    - The Question “is it ok?” applies to me
- Therefore I answer “no it is not ok” because I probably would not be at fault.

Disapproved violence

Although most respondents approved of wife beating under some circumstances, most indicated, without being asked directly, that it often happened for the wrong reasons--for example, for what they saw as trivial reasons, or when a man was simply in a bad mood. This may partly explain why most study participants first said IPV was not justified in the first set of interviews, when they were asked the generic question. It may also explain why many of the people who condoned IPV in some situations suggested ways to stop IPV when asked at the end of the interview whether something should be done to stop it.

Ericsson, KA, and HS Simon. (1980). Verbal Reports as Data. Psychological Review 87: 215 – 250.

Jewkes, R. (2002). "Intimate partner violence: causes and prevention." The Lancet 359: 1423-9.

Garcia-Moreno, C., H. A. F. M. Jansen, et al. (2005). WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women: Initial Results on Prevalence, Health Outcomes and Women's Responses. Geneva, World Health Organization.

Schuler, S. R. and F. Islam (2008). "Women's Acceptance of Intimate Partner Violence within Marriage: Qualitative Perspectives from Rural Bangladesh." *Studies in Family Planning*, 39(1): 49-58.

Willis, GB. 1999. *Cognitive interviewing: A “how to” guide*. Research Triangle Park: Research Triangle Institute.