

Cognitive Testing Sensitive Questions with Youth: Sensitivity of the Questions vs. Sensitivity of the Cognitive Probes

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Cognitive Testing for ED School Climate Surveys

- RSS conducted two rounds of cognitive testing in 2016/2017
 - 80 total respondents
 - 40 teachers, administrators and other school staff
 - **40 students between 5th and 12th grade (aged 10-18)**
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Cognitive Testing with Children

“Cognitive interviewing is a valuable tool for improving the quality of survey responses when the respondents are children... Nevertheless, there are likely to be problems if researchers want to solicit children’s attitudes to sensitive topics.”¹ (Ogan et al. 2012)

¹ Christine Ogan , Türkan Karakuş & Engin Kurşun (2013) Methodological Issues in a Survey of Children's Online Risk-Taking and Other Behaviours in Europe, *Journal of Children and Media*, 7:1, 133-150, DOI: 10.1080/17482798.2012.739812

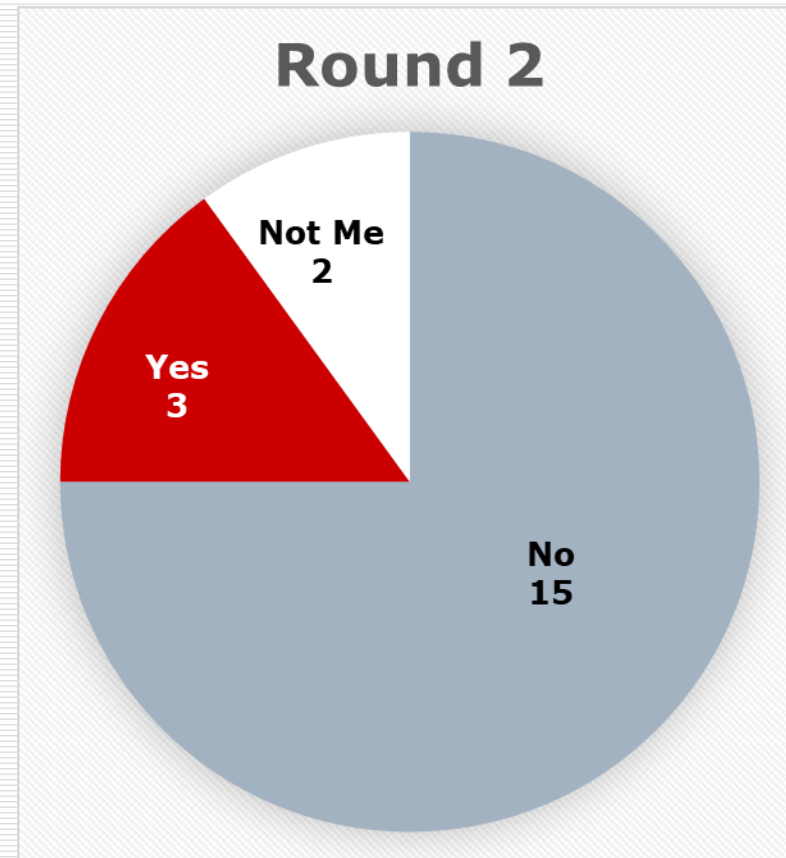
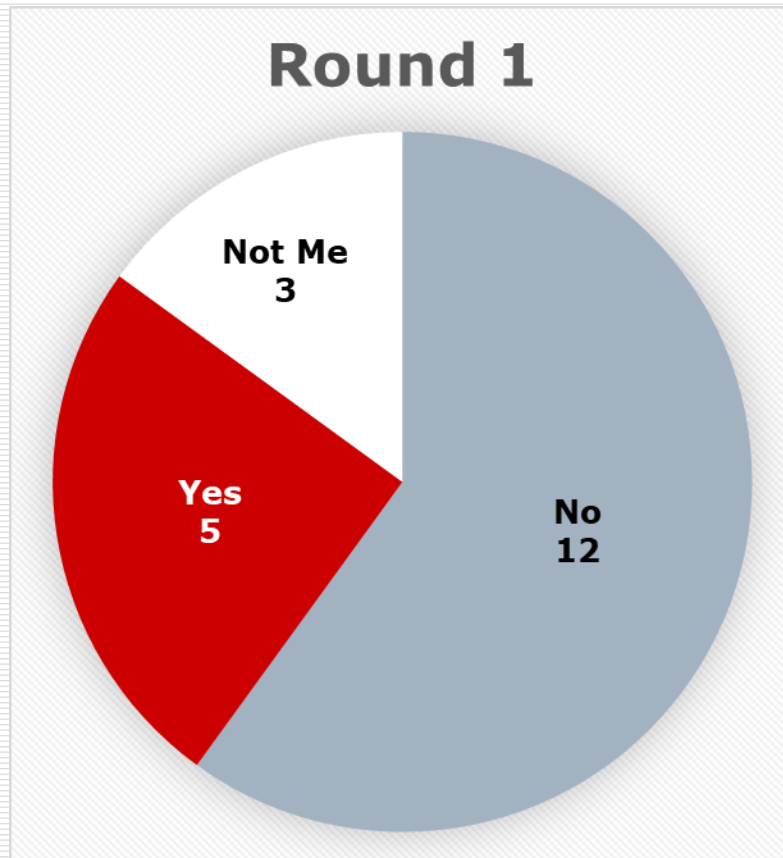
Testing Sensitive Questions with Youth

- Purpose of cognitive testing was for clarity and uniform interpretation of survey items
 - Overall, students understood Qs as intended, selected coded response without issues
 - Survey questions were of a sensitive nature
 - Issues related to the school climate regarding sexual misconduct among students
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Uncomfortable with Questions or Uncomfortable with Cognitive Probes?

- All students asked in debrief:
Were there any questions that made you uncomfortable?
 - Students generally reported that survey questions did not make them feel uncomfortable
 - Interviewers reported that many young respondents *seemed* uncomfortable during cognitive interview process
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Were there any questions that made you uncomfortable?



Were there any questions that made you uncomfortable?

"I think that just for any child that one where it had the sexual comments, jokes or body gestures, stuff like that I think that they would make any kid uncomfortable." (Middle School)

"I'm comfortable with it but I'm not sure about all the students at my school being comfortable with that." (Middle School)

"The crotch and...yeah. Private body parts. Or privates....I think it has to be a little bit more professional in those questions." (High School)

"I wouldn't be uncomfortable with things that happen at my school because that's what happens and people need to be aware, so I feel like things shouldn't have really a stigma." (High School)

Sensitive Questions or Sensitive Probes?

Round 1 Question: At this school, students often have their sexual body parts touched or grabbed (for example, forced kissing, touching of their butt, crotch, or breasts) when they do not agree to it and do not want it to happen.

Round 1 Probe: What do you think they mean in this question by "sexual body parts"? Would you prefer the term "private body parts"? Why or Why not?

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"Your butt or your private parts, your sexual body parts below." (High School)

"Like, you know, your no-no zone." (High School)

"Reproductive organs - both female and male reproductive organs." (High School)

"Because like...I don't know it's just like, sexual is a little bit like, I think it will make people feel a little weird." (Middle School)

"I don't want to answer." (Middle School)

Sensitive Questions or Sensitive Probes?

Round 2 Question: At school, students make unwanted sexual comments, sexual jokes, sexual hand or body gestures; or spread unwanted sexual rumors, photos, or videos to other people.

Round 2 Probe: What do you think we mean when we say "sexual comments, sexual jokes, or sexual hand or body gestures"?

Round 2: What do you think we mean when we say "sexual comments, sexual jokes, or sexual hand or body gestures"?

"I think it's anything really, anything vulgar, I guess, I would say." (High School)

"I think they mean inappropriate, not for school." (Middle School)

"Like inappropriate, like your body parts, anything that could be about sex or anything. It could be like sexual harassment or anything like that could be happening." (High School)

"Like it's, like dirty things, like things that you're not supposed to know."
(Middle School)

Classifying Responses to Sensitive Probes

Indicators of discomfort for classification included:

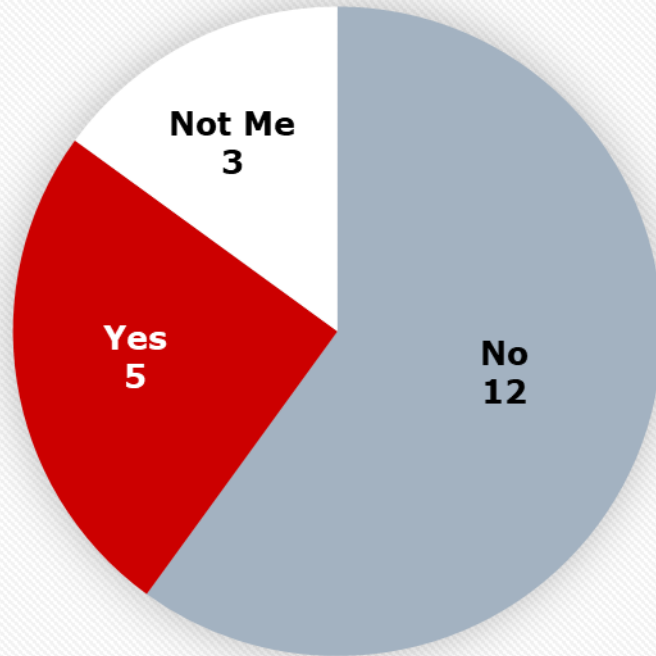
- Hesitation/pause before or within response
- Uncertainty (I don't know)
- Nonresponse
- Change in tone/intonation
- Laughter

1=No sign of discomfort

2=Some sign of discomfort

Results of Classification Round 1

**Round 1
Self-Reported Discomfort**

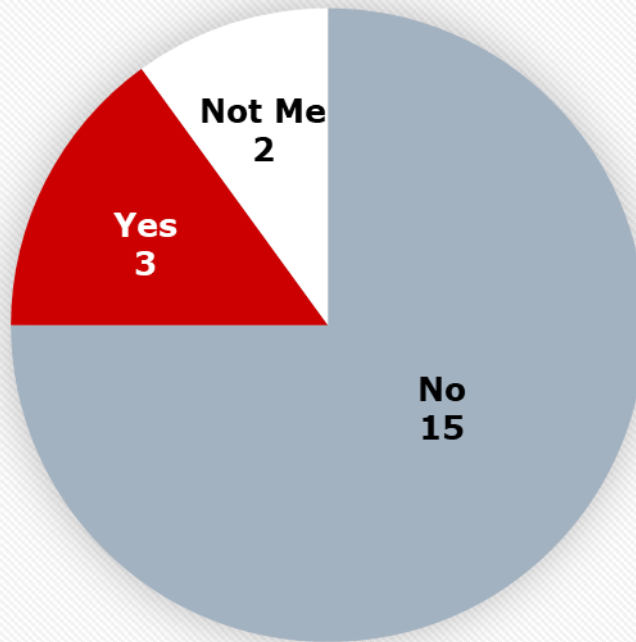


**Round 1 Response
Classifications of
Comfort**



Results of Classification Round 2

**Round 2
Self-Reported Discomfort**



**Round 2 Response
Classifications of
Comfort**



Summary of Findings

- While most young respondents said the survey questions did not make them feel uncomfortable, many showed signs of discomfort during probing
 - The cognitive interview process itself may cause discomfort when probing on sensitive questions
 - There is evidence that probing on sensitive questions may make young respondents uncomfortable, while the questions themselves might not
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Limitations & Considerations

- Informal method/Not formal behavior coding
 - Only one evaluator
 - No IRR
 - Classifications not pre-established
 - No non-verbal data
 - Only analyzed one selected “sensitive” question and probe per round
 - Should analyze across full interview for differences in response behavior
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Implications for Future Research

- Beyond question interpretation, be aware of cognitive interviewing process when testing sensitive questions
 - Youth as a special/unique population
 - Consider potential sensitivity of probes when developing instruments
 - Question order
 - Focused interviewer training for studies testing sensitive topics
 - Interviewer effects
 - Plan for incorporating behavior coding methods prior to data collection
 - Subjectivity: Discomfort can be tricky to measure!
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Thank you!

Questions?

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