

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unacknowledged and missed cases of sexual victimization: A comparison of responses to broad versus behaviorally specific questions

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Abstract

From the beginning of systematic research on sexual victimization, it has been recognized that a substantial proportion of women report nonconsensual sexual experiences meeting the defining criteria of rape in response to behaviorally specific items, but do not acknowledge their experience as rape in response to broad questions about whether they have ever been raped. Recent studies suggest that rates of unacknowledged rape may be as high or even higher among men than among women. This study examined rates of unacknowledged female and male victims of rape and sexual assault by comparing responses to behaviorally specific items of the Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale (SAV-S) with responses to broad questions using the labels of sexual assault and rape (SARA) in 593 participants (303 women) in Germany. As predicted, more women and men were classified as rape victims based on behaviorally specific items than on the basis of the broad rape item. The rates of unacknowledged rape were about 60% for women and 75% for men. The gender difference was not significant. Against our prediction, no significant differences in acknowledgement of sexual assault were found in relation to coercive strategy and victim–perpetrator relationship. Few cases of rape and sexual assault identified by the SARA items were missed by the behaviorally specific questions. The implications for establishing prevalence rates of rape and sexual assault and for comparing victims and nonvictims in terms of vulnerability factors and outcomes of sexual victimization are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Germany, rape, Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale, sexual assault, sexual victimization, unacknowledged victims

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1 | INTRODUCTION

It has long been recognized that rape and sexual assault are underreported on a large scale, not only to the police (e.g., Temkin & Krahé, 2008) but also in surveys and research studies on the prevalence of sexual victimization (e.g., Kahn et al., 1994; Koss & Oros, 1982; Littleton et al., 2017). A major reason is that the terms of rape and sexual assault are not clearly defined and/or contested in societal and legal discourse and are surrounded by myths and stereotypes that affect not only responses by the criminal justice system but also victims' own interpretations of what had happened to them (Krahé, 2016). Victims often fail to acknowledge their experience as rape or sexual assault and therefore remain "hidden" and unacknowledged in counts of the prevalence of sexual aggression (Koss, 2011). Hidden or unacknowledged victims are defined as those victims who endorse behaviorally specific questions about nonconsensual sexual experiences (e.g., "have you ever been made to engage in sexual intercourse through the use or threat of force"), while rejecting items that capture the same experience using broad labels, such as "have you ever been raped." Research has shown that unacknowledged rape is more likely the more the experience deviates from the "real rape" stereotype of a sexual assault by a stranger on an unsuspecting victim who offers strong physical resistance (Krahé, 2016), leading to a systematic underreporting of victimization experiences that involve other strategies than physical coercion, a nonstranger perpetrator, or an intoxicated victim (Koss, 1985; Rousseau et al., 2020). Therefore, to address the problem of unacknowledged sexual aggression, the use of behaviorally specific questions rather than broad labels, such as rape or sexual assault, has been established as the gold standard in sexual aggression research for some time (Cook et al., 2011; Krahé & Vanwesenbeeck, 2016).

The reverse possibility, namely, that cases may be missed by using behaviorally specific questions that broad questions about rape or sexual assault might have detected, has received very little research attention so far. Conceptually, this possibility is relevant because by the very nature of behaviorally specific questions, they contain cues about certain types of coercive strategies and coerced sexual acts, such as whether the respondent has been made to engage in specific sexual acts (e.g., "someone fondled, kissed, or rubbed up against the private areas of your body") through the use of specific coercive strategies (e.g., "taking advantage of you when you were too drunk or out of it to stop what was happening"; Sexual Experiences Survey—SES; Koss et al., 2007). Thus, behaviorally specific questions create a search space for retrieving potentially matching personal experiences. They may limit respondents' search strategy when prompted to recall sexual victimization to those experiences described in the items, thereby missing experiences not covered by the respective items. The present study was designed to examine both types of potential problems in the accurate measurement of sexual victimization by documenting the number of cases of sexual victimization detected and missed by behaviorally specific questions as compared to questions using broad labels of sexual

assault and rape. For the purposes of the present study, sexual aggression was defined by a range of sexual activities, such as sexual intercourse, oral sex, kissing, and sexual touching, imposed on another person against her or his will. Coercive strategies involve the threat or use of physical force, exploitation of the victim's inability to resist, or verbal pressure (Krahé, 2021). This definition, which is broader than legal definitions of sexual assault, was adopted to cover a comprehensive range of nonconsensual sexual experiences as assessed by behaviorally specific instruments.

1.1 | Measurement, scale, and implications of unacknowledged rape

As noted above, unacknowledged rape is assessed by the incongruence between "no" responses to broad questions and "yes" responses to behaviorally specific questions. If individuals endorse one or more of the behaviorally specific items, but give "no" responses to the broad questions about rape or sexual assault, it is concluded that they do not conceptualize their own experience as rape or sexual assault and therefore count as unacknowledged victims. The scale of unacknowledged rape has been documented both in qualitative and quantitative studies. For instance, in a meta-analysis of 30 independent samples examining reports of women who met the criterion of being victims of rape, the prevalence of unacknowledged rape was 60.4% (Wilson & Miller, 2016).

More recently, Donde et al. (2018) studied rape acknowledgement based on the SES (Koss et al., 2007) in a sample of 1115 women. They found that of 174 women identified as victims of rape based on their responses to the behaviorally specific items of the SES (nonconsensual vaginal penetration through the use or threat of physical force or alcohol intoxication), 74.7% answered "no" to the question whether they had ever been raped. In the same sample, 58.6% of women who endorsed at least one of the SES items did not endorse the broad question of whether they had ever experienced a sexual assault. This significant difference in the proportion of unacknowledged nonconsensual experiences shows that rape victims may be more likely to report their nonconsensual experience as a sexual assault, a category somewhat less charged with stereotypes and negative connotations, than as a rape. Rape acknowledgement was more likely when the perpetrator had used physical force and when the experience had had a strong emotional impact.

Other recent studies found even higher rates of unacknowledged rape in men than in women (Reed et al., 2020). Rates of unacknowledged victims were lower in sexual minorities as compared to heterosexuals (Anderson et al., 2021; Reed et al., 2020; Wilson & Newins, 2019). In addition, unacknowledged victims were more likely to endorse rape myths and traditional sexual scripts that assign men the role of initiators and women the role of gatekeepers of sexual contact (Donde et al., 2018; Koss, 1985; Wilson & Newins, 2019).

Using methods for assessing sexual victimization that maximize rape acknowledgement is important not only for gaining an accurate picture of the scale of sexual victimization but also for all studies that examine

vulnerability factors and outcomes of victimization based on comparisons of victims and nonvictims, as misclassifying unacknowledged victims as nonvictims may have a large impact on the findings (see Krahé, 2021, for a review). Moreover, unacknowledged rape has been linked to a number of adverse outcomes, including a higher likelihood of revictimization, while levels of psychological distress equal those of acknowledged victims of sexual aggression (Littleton & Henderson, 2009; Littleton et al., 2017, 2019; Ryan, 2011; Wilson & Newins, 2019).

1.2 | Unacknowledged rape and mental constructions of rape and consent

Whether or not individuals report a specific sexual experience as rape or sexual assault depends on their conceptualization of nonconsensual sexual experiences (Hills et al., 2021; Rousseau et al., 2020). When deciding to answer “yes” to the question “have you ever been raped”, they need to activate their cognitive representation of rape and evaluate their experience in relation to this representation. For example, if a person’s conceptualization of rape is limited to the features of the “real rape” stereotype of an attack by a stranger using physical force, they will not identify a sexual intercourse coerced by a former partner exploiting the fact that they were drunk as a case of rape and are likely to answer “no” to the respective question (Cleere & Lynn, 2013; Hills et al., 2021). Consistent with this reasoning, several studies have shown that unacknowledged rape victims are more likely to endorse rape myths, label their experience as miscommunication rather than sexual assault, or experience rape by other means of coercion than the use of physical force (Dardis et al., 2021; Newins et al., 2021; Reed et al., 2020; Rousseau et al., 2020). Moreover, unacknowledged rape victims were shown to rate the probability of being raped to be significantly lower than acknowledged victims (Boyle & Walker, 2016). These findings suggest that rape myths and stereotypes as well as traditional gender roles in heterosexual relationships may be linked to a normalization of sexual aggression as an underlying process for unacknowledged rape and sexual assault.

2 | THE CURRENT STUDY

So far, most studies investigating unacknowledged rape have used the SES (Koss & Oros, 1982; Koss et al., 2007), including the study by Donde et al. (2018) by which the current study was inspired. The Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale (SAV-S; Krahé & Berger, 2013) is another multi-item, behaviorally specific instrument that has been employed and validated in a range of different countries and languages in Europe and Latin America (Krahé & Berger, 2013; Krahé et al., 2021; Schuster, Krahé, Ilabaca Baeza, et al., 2016; Schuster, Krahé, & Toplu-Demirtaş, 2016; Tomaszewska & Krahé, 2018). Because large-scale evidence regarding the prevalence of sexual victimization based on the SAV-S has accumulated in recent years, it is crucial to examine the problem of unacknowledged

rape and sexual assault for this measure. Comparing the findings to the evidence based on the SES may show whether the two instruments are similar or different regarding the proportion of unacknowledged victims.

Moreover, the study can contribute to the evaluation of unacknowledged rape as a methodological challenge in the study of sexual victimization more generally in several ways: (1) by adding the analysis of cases missed by behaviorally specific questions, which is all but ignored in the existing literature, (2) by studying gender differences in rape acknowledgement, and (3) by analyzing potential differences in the rate of unacknowledged cases in relation to coercive strategy and victim–perpetrator relationship. Replicating and extending the analytic approach by Donde et al. (2018), our study was designed to address the following tasks:

First, we identified the proportion of unacknowledged rape victims and unacknowledged victims of sexual assault by comparing participants’ responses to the behaviorally specific items of the SAV-S with their responses to the broad questions about sexual assault and rape acknowledgement (SARA), respectively. Based on previous research, we predicted that victimization rates derived from behaviorally specific items would be higher than victimization rates based on participants’ endorsement of broad questions using the labels of rape or sexual assault (Hypothesis 1).

In addition, and also in line with Donde et al. (2018), we examined the possibility that participants would not acknowledge rape, but assign their rape experience reported on behaviorally specific rape items to the category of sexual assault. For this purpose, we broke down the overall reports of victimization in the SAV-S into a severity score so that participants who reported completed rape could be identified and matched to their responses on the broad SARA items about rape and sexual assault. This approach facilitates a differentiated analysis of unacknowledged rape by examining whether participants who reported rape on a behaviorally specific measure did not acknowledge it as a victimization experience at all or instead categorized it as a sexual assault.

Second, we addressed the question of gender differences in unacknowledged rape and sexual assault. Past research has focused on women because of their higher victimization rates (Fedina et al., 2018), but there is growing evidence that men also experience sexual victimization at a substantial rate (Depraetere et al., 2020). Stereotypic notions not only exclude certain situational contexts and victim–perpetrator constellations from the conceptualization of a “real rape” of female victims but they also minimize the possibility of male victimization by women, as shown by research on male rape myths (DeJong et al., 2020; Reitz-Krueger et al., 2017). Social constructions of rape as limited to female victims also affect men’s interpretation of their nonconsensual sexual experiences, especially with women, and some evidence suggests that rates of unacknowledged victimization experiences may be higher for men than for women (Reed et al., 2020). By including male and female participants, we examined the prediction that the rate of unacknowledged victims would be higher for men than for women (Hypothesis 2).

Third, we investigated differences in rates of unacknowledged rape and sexual assault as a function of victim–perpetrator relationship and type of coercive strategy. In accordance with theorizing and research on rape scripts and rape stereotypes (e.g., Krahe et al., 2007; Ryan, 2011), we expected unacknowledged rape to be more likely when the experience deviated from the narrow definition of the “real rape” stereotype of a stranger attack involving the use of force (Jaffe, Steel, et al., 2021; Krahe, 2016). Specifically, we expected the highest number of unacknowledged victims for rape and sexual assault experiences in which the perpetrator was a current or former romantic partner, followed by acquaintances and friends, and the lowest number for experiences in which the perpetrator was a stranger (Hypothesis 3).

Similarly, regarding the coercive strategies, we expected that incidents involving the use of verbal pressure would be least acknowledged, followed by the exploitation of the victim's inability to resist and experiences in which the perpetrator used or threatened to use physical force (Hypothesis 4). This prediction ties in with the finding by Donde et al. (2018) that acknowledged rape victims were significantly more likely than unacknowledged victims to have experienced force.

Finally, we extended the analysis of previous studies by exploring to what extent behaviorally specific items may miss experiences of sexual victimization that prompt respondents to endorse broad items. By comparing responses to the SAV-S and the broad questions about SARA, it is possible to identify individuals who self-identified as victims of rape and/or sexual assault on the SARA items but rejected all behaviorally specific items. Assuming that the SAV-S comprehensively covers the range of different forms and contexts of sexual victimization, participants who report rape in response to the SARA questions should also endorse the corresponding items of the SAV-S. Consequently, a low rate of missed incidents would support the comprehensiveness of the behaviorally specific measure, which is an indication of its construct validity but has largely been neglected in past research with its focus on the problem of unacknowledged rape by broad questions.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Sample

The sample consisted of 593 participants (303 women, 51.1%) with a mean age of 25.1 years ($SD = 4.17$; range: 18–35 years), most of whom were German nationals (90.4%). Students made up 57.4% of the sample, 19.8% worked full-time, 12.2% part-time, 1.7% freelance, 1.7% were housewives/husbands, and 2% had no current occupation or were unable to work. The proportion of students in our sample exactly matches the national-level proportion of first-year students in German universities in 2019, the year the data were collected, which was 57.6% (Statistica, 2022). Most women (77.4%) and men (81.3%) described their sexual orientation as heterosexual, followed by bisexual (women: 17.5%; men: 10.6%) and homosexual (women:

5.1%; men: 8.1%). The mean age of first sex for women and men was 17.0 years ($SD = 2.68$; range: 5–34 years). No significant gender differences were found regarding age and age of first sex. More women (91.4%) than men (85.2%) reported prior relationship experiences, $\chi^2(1, N = 588) = 5.39, p = .02$. Regarding sexual experiences, slightly fewer women than men reported opposite-sex contacts only (63.4% vs. 66.6%) as well as same-sex contacts only (1.3% vs. 5.5%), whereas more women than men reported both opposite- and same-sex contacts (34.3% vs. 20.7%), $ps < .001$.

3.2 | Instruments

3.2.1 | Sexual victimization

Sexual victimization since the age of 14 years, the legal age of consent in Germany, was assessed using the SAV-S (Krahe & Berger, 2013; Krahe et al., 2021). Based on the revised version of the SES (Koss et al., 2007), the SAV-S differentiates between three coercive strategies (threat or use of physical force, exploitation of the inability of the victim to resist, and use of verbal pressure), four sexual activities (sexual touch, attempted penetration, completed penetration, and other sexual acts, e.g., oral sex), and, additionally, three types of victim–perpetrator relationship constellations (current/former partner, friend/acquaintance, and stranger). In total, it consists of 36 items (three coercive strategies \times four sexual activities \times three victim–perpetrator relationships) that were tailored to the individual participant by their gender (male/female) and sexual experience background (same-sex and/or opposite-sex contact). Responses to the items were made in a dichotomous yes/no format.

3.2.2 | SARA

Acknowledgement of rape and sexual assault experiences was assessed using the two items by Donde et al. (2018): “Have you ever been raped at or after the age of 14?” and “Have you ever been sexually assaulted at or after the age of 14?”. Both items used a dichotomous response format (yes/no).

3.3 | Procedure and plan of analysis

Data were collected in Germany through an online survey, and all materials were presented in German. Participants were recruited through online and offline advertisements and compensated via the opportunity to enter a raffle to win shopping vouchers. The Institutional Review Board of the first author's university approved the study protocol and all instruments. Participants were informed that the study was about nonconsensual sexual experiences and had to give active consent to start the survey. Each page of the survey contained a “help button” that led to a list of professional service providers for victims of sexual aggression in case the question

content triggered upsetting memories. The SAV-S items were always presented first, followed by the SARA items. The data for the present study were part of a larger study investigating the effect of differences in question format on prevalence rates of sexual victimization and came from participants who received the standard version of the SAV-S leading with the coercive strategy (Schuster et al., 2021).

The rate of missing data was below 1% for all analyses except for men's responses to the broad rape question (5.2%). The hypotheses were tested using χ^2 tests, McNemar tests for dependent observations, and Cochran's Q test for significant differences between more than two proportions.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Overall prevalence rates based on broad and behaviorally specific questions

In the total sample, 15.6% of the female and 3.8% of the male respondents indicated in response to the broad question that they had experienced rape since the age of 14 (SARA question 1), and 57.1% of female participants and 17.6% of male participants reported that they had experienced a sexual assault in the same period (SARA question 2). The gender difference was significant on both items, $\chi^2 (df = 1, 590) = 23.19, p < .001$, for the rape question, and $\chi^2 (df = 1, 592) = 97.87, p < .001$, for the sexual assault question. Combining "yes" responses to both questions, 58.1% of women and 17.6% of men endorsed one or both of the two SARA items. Based on the SAV-S, 85.7% of female respondents and 49.8% of male respondents were classified as victims because they endorsed at least one of the behaviorally specific questions. The gender differences was significant, $\chi^2 (df = 1, 576) = 85.93, p < .001$.

4.2 | Unacknowledged victims

In the first test of Hypothesis 1, we compared the proportion of participants classified as victims of sexual assault based on their endorsement of at least one item of the SAV-S with the proportion of participants who endorsed the SARA question "Have you ever been sexually assaulted at or after the age of 14?". The results, based on McNemar tests for dependent observations, are shown in Table 1 for

women and men. Among both men and women, significantly more victims of any sexual assault were identified by the SAV-S compared to the broad questions about sexual assault, test statistic_{Women} = 72.90, $p < .001$; test statistic_{Men} = 77.85, $p < .001$.

The next step in the test of Hypothesis 1 was conducted only with participants identified as victims of rape by the SAV-S to match the analyses by Donde et al. (2018). To establish this subgroup, we first created a nonredundant severity score for each participant. We adapted the scoring approach proposed by Koss et al. (2007, 2008) for the SES to the SAV-S, following previous studies (Krahé & Berger, 2021; Krahé et al., 2021; Tomaszewska et al., 2021). This classification assigned participants to one of five levels of severity: (0) *nonvictimization* (no responses to all SAV-S items), (1) *sexual contact* (reported unwanted sexual touch excluding penetration, via verbal pressure, exploitation of the victim's inability to resist, or the use of threat or physical force, but excluding coercion, attempted rape, and rape), (2) *sexual coercion* (reported unwanted attempted or completed oral, vaginal, or anal penetration through verbal pressure, but no attempted rape, and rape), (3) *attempted rape* (reported unwanted attempted oral, vaginal, or anal penetration through the exploitation of the victim's inability to resist, or the use or threat of physical force, but not rape), (4) *rape* (reported unwanted, completed oral, vaginal, or anal penetration through the exploitation of the victim's inability to resist, or the use or threat of physical force).

Of the female participants, 14.3% ($n = 43$) fell into the nonvictim category, 23.3% ($n = 70$) into the sexual contact category, 9.0% ($n = 27$) into the sexual coercion category, 21.6% ($n = 65$) in the attempted rape category, and 31.9% ($n = 96$) into the category of completed rape. Of the male participants, 50.2% ($n = 138$) fell into the nonvictim category, 25.1% ($n = 69$) into the sexual contact category, 4.7% ($n = 13$) into the sexual coercion category, 8.4% ($n = 23$) in the attempted rape category, and 11.6% ($n = 32$) into the rape category. Thus, the sample for the subsequent analyses consisted of $n = 128$ participants (96 women and 32 men) identified as victims of rape by their responses to the SAV-S. As shown in the top part of Table 2, 59.4% of the female and 75.0% of the male rape victims as identified by the SAV-S did not acknowledge their rape experience, indicated by answering "no" to the question "Have you ever been raped at or after the age of 14?". Against our prediction in Hypothesis 2, the gender differences was not significant, $\chi^2 (df = 1, 128) = 2.52, p = .11$.

To examine the possibility that victims of rape identified on the basis of SAV-S would not endorse the SARA question about rape but endorse the question about sexual assault, we calculated the

TABLE 1 Prevalence rates of sexual victimization by SAV-S and SARA item "Have you ever been sexually assaulted at or after the age of 14?"

Women			Men		
SAV-S, % (n)	SARA, % (n)	Diff (%)	SAV-S, % (n)	SARA, % (n)	Diff (%)
85.7 (258)	58.1 (175)	27.6***	49.8 (137)	17.6 (51)	32.2***

Abbreviations: Diff, difference between the proportion of respondents classified as victims by the two measures; SAV-S, Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scales; SARA, sexual assault and rape acknowledgement.

*** $p < .001$.

	Women, % (n)	Men, % (n)
Have you ever been raped at or after the age of 14?		
No (=unacknowledged victims of rape)	59.4 (57)	75.0 (24)
Yes (=acknowledged victims of rape)	40.6 (39)	25.0 (8)
Have you ever been sexually assaulted at or after the age of 14?		
No (=unacknowledged victim of any sexual assault)	15.6 (15)^a	53.1 (17)^b
Yes (=rape experience identified as sexual assault)	84.4 (81)	46.9 (15)
Breakdown of acknowledgement status		
Unacknowledged sexual assault and rape	13.5 (13)	53.1 (17)
Acknowledged sexual assault, but not rape	45.8 (44)	21.9 (7)
Acknowledged rape, but not sexual assault	2.1 (2)	0 (0)
Acknowledged both sexual assault and rape	38.5 (37)	25.0 (8)

Note: All participants were identified as victims of rape based on their responses to the SAV-S. Figures in bold denote unacknowledged victims.

^{a,b}Gender difference is significant at $p < .001$.

TABLE 3 Unacknowledged victims of sexual assault by victim–perpetrator constellation and coercive strategy

	Women, % (n)	Men, % (n)
Victim–perpetrator relationship		
(Ex-)Partner	34.4 (45)	61.1 (33)
Friend/acquaintance	28.0 (46)	62.2 (51)
Stranger	31.9 (58)	61.8 (55)
Coercive strategy		
Use or threat of force	31.9 (61)	64.5 (60)
Exploitation of incapacitated state	30.0 (51)	64.7 (55)
Verbal pressure	33.3 (50)	63.3 (35)

Note: All participants were identified as victims based on their responses to the SAV-S. Unacknowledged victims: “No” response to the SARA question about sexual assault.

proportion of rape victims who endorsed the sexual assault question (“have you ever been sexually assaulted since the age of 14”). Among female rape victims, 84.4% answered “yes” to the question of whether they had ever experienced a sexual assault at or after the age of 14 years. The corresponding rate for male rape victims was 46.9%. The gender difference was significant, $\chi^2 (df = 1, 128) = 18.00$, $p < .001$, and shows that men were less likely than women to acknowledge a rape experience as a sexual assault rather than a rape.

In a further step, we classified participants in the rape victim category by their combination of responses to the two SARA questions, following the approach by Donde et al. (2018): participants who (1) did not acknowledge either rape or sexual assault (“no” responses to both SARA questions), (2) acknowledged sexual assault, but not rape, (3) acknowledged rape, but not sexual assault, and (4) acknowledged both sexual assault and rape. The proportions for each category are presented in the bottom part of Table 2. The distribution of participants in the four groups

TABLE 2 Rates of acknowledged and unacknowledged victims of rape and sexual assault

differed significantly by gender, $\chi^2 (df = 3, 128) = 21.42$, $p < .001$. Fewer female than male rape victims identified by the SAV-S answered “no” to both of the broad questions, whereas more female than male rape victims endorsed the sexual assault question.

To test Hypotheses 3 and 4, that rates of unacknowledged sexual assault would be higher in the less stereotypical cases of partner rape and rape involving the use verbal pressure, we examined the rates of unacknowledged victims for the three victim–perpetrator constellations (current or former partner, friend or acquaintance, stranger) and three coercive strategies (use or threat of force, exploiting the victim’s inability to resist, verbal pressure) addressed by the SAV-S. To ensure a sufficient cell size for this comparison, we conducted the analysis for all participants who fell into any of the four victimization categories defined by responses to the SAV-S and for the SARA item “have you ever been sexually assaulted at or after the age of 14”. The findings are displayed in Table 3, which presents the percentage and number of participants who endorsed the behaviorally specific items but did not endorse the SARA item of sexual assault. Cochran’s Q tests testing for significant differences between more than two proportions revealed that for both men and women, the percentages of unacknowledged sexual assault victims did not differ significantly between the three relationship categories or between the three coercive strategies. Thus, the predictions in Hypotheses 3 and 4 that unacknowledged rates of sexual assault would be higher in the less stereotypical category of partner assault or assault involving the use of verbal pressure were not supported by the data.

4.3 | Victims missed by the behaviorally specific questions, but detected by the SARA questions

Finally, to extend the analysis of discrepancies between victimization reports based on behaviorally specific items as opposed to broad

questions, we investigated the degree to which the behaviorally specific items missed experiences of sexual assault reported in response to the broad questions. Such missed cases may be detected by establishing the percentage of participants categorized into the “nonvictim” category based on their SAV-S responses who answered “yes” to one or both of the SARA questions. The analysis showed that 9.3% of the female and 2.9% of the male participants classified as nonvictims because they answered “no” to all SAV-S items endorsed the SARA question about sexual assault, that is they reported that they had experienced a sexual assault at or after the age of 14, even though they did not endorse any of the SAV-S items. The percentage of participants who were either classified as nonvictims or fell into the victimization categories below the rape category, but endorsed the question of whether they had ever experienced rape since the age of 14, was 3.9% in the female and 1.2% in the male sample. These figures show that behaviorally specific questions may entail the problem of missing cases that would have been reported in response to broad questions. However, the rates of missed cases are substantially lower than the rates of unacknowledged victims for both women and men. They show that behaviorally specific questions are far less likely to miss cases of sexual assault and rape that would be detected by broad questions compared to the odds that broad questions will miss experiences detected by behaviorally specific questions.

5 | DISCUSSION

5.1 | Summary of findings

This study aimed to investigate the problem of unacknowledged rape and sexual assault in a German sample comprising women and men. By definition, unacknowledged rape and sexual assault victims report instances of nonconsensual sexual interactions on behaviorally specific items, but do not identify their experiences as rape or sexual assault on broad questions using these labels. A substantial body of literature has documented the problem of unacknowledged rape (Wilson & Miller, 2016). As a result, classifications of individuals into victims and nonvictims of sexual aggression based on broad questions are likely to underestimate victimization rates, which may lead not only to biased prevalence estimates but also to distorted findings of comparisons between victims and nonvictims with respect to vulnerability factors and outcomes of sexual victimization. Moreover, we addressed the possibility that behaviorally specific questions may miss experiences reported in response to questions using broad labels such as rape or sexual assault. Both types of incongruence are problematic for the assessment of sexual victimization.

We closely replicated the conceptual approach by Donde et al. (2018) applied to the SES (Koss et al., 2007) to study unacknowledged rape in the SAV-S by Krahe and Berger (2013). Following Donde et al. (2018), we expected in Hypothesis 1 that the prevalence of sexual victimization measured with a single broad

question (i.e., “Have you ever been raped?”) would yield lower rates than using a multi-item behaviorally specific measure, asking about nonconsensual penetrative sex through the use or threat of force or the exploitation of the person's incapacitated state. This hypothesis was fully supported by the data. Prevalence rates of sexual assault were significantly higher when measured with the SAV-S than when measured by the two SARA items in both gender groups. Of all participants classified as rape victims based on the SAV-S, only 40% of women and 25% of men acknowledged their experience as rape on the broad question.

Whereas Donde et al. (2018) only studied women, our sample included women and men, thereby allowing us to examine gender differences in rape acknowledgement. Our prediction in Hypothesis 2 that the proportion of unacknowledged rape cases would be higher for men than for women was not supported by the data. This finding is at odds with the results reported by Reed et al. (2020), who did find men to be less likely to acknowledge rape. However, we found that men were significantly less likely than women to classify their rape experience as a sexual assault. In combination with the fact that the meta-analysis by Wilson and Miller (2016) only included women, these findings indicate the need for further research into the role of gender in unacknowledged rape and sexual assault. Given that evidence is growing about substantial male victimization rates (Depraetere et al., 2020; Krahe et al., 2021), finding reliable ways of assessing male victimization is a critical task, all the more so because myths about male rape may undermine men's identification of nonconsensual sex with women as sexual assault or rape (DeJong et al., 2020; Reitz-Krueger et al., 2017).

In comparison with Donde et al. (2018), the rates of unacknowledged female rape victims were substantially lower in our study based on the SAV-S than their rate reported for the SES (74.7%; men were not included in the Donde et al. study). One explanation could be that the SAV-S breaks down questions about coercive strategies and sexual acts into three different victim–perpetrator relationships and that the SARA items were presented after the SAV-S items. Thus, the items may have cued participants to think more extensively about potential victimization experiences in different victim–perpetrator constellations, including current or former partners and acquaintances, before being presented with the broad questions. Because Donde et al. (2018) did not report the order in which they presented the SES and the SARA items, this explanation remains tentative. Another difference is that the percentage of women identified as rape victims on the behaviorally specific measure was higher in our study (31.7%) than in their study (17%), which may reflect a greater awareness of sexual assault. However, our findings are similar to another study with the SES, including both men and women, that found rates of unacknowledged rape of 51.1% for women and 80% for men (Reed et al., 2020). Thus, future research is needed to examine whether differences in acknowledgement rates vary consistently between measures as well as between countries.

Furthermore, we examined the possibility that rape victims defined by their SAV-S responses might be more likely to report their

experience on a broad question about sexual assault than on a broad question about rape. The finding that the proportion of unacknowledged rape victims was substantially lower for the SARA item about sexual assault (15.6% for women; 53.1% for men) than the SARA item about rape (59.4% for women; 75.0% for men) is consistent with the results by Donde et al. (2018). It has been suggested that victims prefer the label “sexual assault” to the label “rape” because of the negative societal connotations attached to rape victims. An alternative explanation could be that due to widely shared stereotypes about rape, participants may have been less sure about whether their experience matched the specific characteristics of rape, even though they recognized it as a sexual assault (Hirsch et al., 2019; Temkin & Krahe, 2008; Willis & Smith, 2021).

No support emerged in our study for Hypotheses 3 and 4, predicting differences in acknowledgement rates in relation to certain characteristics of the victimization experiences, such as use or absence of force or closeness to the “real rape” stereotype (Krahe, 2016). This finding is at odds with Donde et al. (2018) and other studies that found lower rates of unacknowledged victims in the more stereotypical constellations, such as involving strangers and the use of physical force. This may be explained partly by the higher overall acknowledgement rate in our study, indicating that participants conceptualized the broad SARA questions in a somewhat more comprehensive way. In combination, the lack of significant differences in rape acknowledgement as a function of coercive strategy and victim-perpetrator relationship might optimistically be interpreted as an indication that stereotypes about “real” sexual assaults may become weaker. This process may be facilitated by the worldwide publicity of the #MeToo movement, which has raised awareness about non-stereotypical forms of sexual aggression (Jaffe, Cero, et al., 2021).

Finally, we examined whether behaviorally specific items may miss cases of rape and sexual assault that broad questions might detect. In our study, about 4% of female and 1% of male victims who indicated that they had been raped did not endorse the corresponding behaviorally specific items of the SAV-S. These rates are only a fraction of the case missed by the broad SARA question (about 60% for women and 75% for men). However, qualitative studies with participants who show a discrepancy between responses to the broad and behaviorally specific questions are needed to address the exact nature of nonconsensual sexual experiences missed by behaviorally specific items (Buday & Peterson, 2015; Strang & Peterson, 2017).

5.2 | Strengths and limitations

To our knowledge, this study is the first on the topic of unacknowledged rape in Germany, using a validated instrument other than the original or modified SES. It provides data outside the North American mainstream, contributing to an international knowledge base on unacknowledged rape. Furthermore, the study included both men and women and examined unacknowledged rape

cases missed by behaviorally specific as compared to broad questions, adding a new aspect to assessing sexual victimization. Nonetheless, some limitations have to be noted about our study. First, most of the participants were heterosexual, precluding a comparison of acknowledgement rates with nonheterosexual participants. Past research suggests that rates of unacknowledged rape may be lower in sexual minorities (Anderson et al., 2017; Wilson & Newins, 2019), but more studies are needed to corroborate and explain this difference.

Second, a fixed order of presentation was used in the present study, with the behaviorally specific SAV-S items preceding the broad questions. Thus, participants were first cued to think about specific experiences before being asked to provide a global answer to the rape and sexual assault questions designed to include all relevant experiences. Prevalence rates of sexual victimization were shown to be sensitive to order effects (Tomaszewska et al., 2021), so future research should vary the sequence of behaviorally specific and broad SARA items to detect possible differences by presentation order on rates of unacknowledged rape and sexual assault as well as cases missed by the behaviorally specific items.

Finally, in line with the bulk of the evidence on unacknowledged rape based on a quantitative methodology, we operationalized acknowledgement or lack thereof by the discrepancy between responses to behaviorally specific and broad questions by categorical yes-no questions and without addressing the cognitive processes underlying this discrepancy. A qualitative study with unacknowledged rape victims identified three mindsets described as “not knowing,” “knowing,” and “ambivalent” (Johnstone, 2016), which suggests that the reasons for the observed discrepancies in responding may vary on a continuum of mental representations of rape and sexual assault as applied to one's own experiences. This line of research about the mental representations leading to endorsement or rejection of items about sexual victimization requires greater attention in future research.

5.3 | Conclusion and outlook

Our results support the use of behaviorally specific items to measure sexual victimization, as recommended in the literature (Cook et al., 2011). The results show that the risk of missing relevant experiences by behaviorally specific items is small compared to the risk of missing experiences by the use of broad questions. This conclusion is supported by recent findings that asking participants to provide detailed descriptions of experiences of sexual aggression had little impact on estimates (Krebs et al., 2021), which suggests that behaviorally specific items are sufficiently comprehensive. Nonetheless, a closer examination of missed cases by the behaviorally specific items in comparison to victimization reports in response to broad items is needed in future studies.

The #MeToo movement has created an increased awareness of transgressions of sexual boundaries and failure to obtain sexual consent, which some authors have linked to an increase in reported

rates of sexual victimization since the movement began (Acquaviva et al., 2021; Jaffe, Cero, et al., 2021; Kaufman et al., 2021). This growing awareness should be reflected in a lower number of unacknowledged sexual victimization in the post-#MeToo era as it should broaden individuals' cognitive representations of sexual aggression that they activate when responding to questions about victimization experiences. Future research will show whether this is the case.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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