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Look Closer: New Definition and Problematic Analyses Obscure, Don't Change, Realities of Serial Rape

To the Editor

In "A Trajectory Analysis of the Campus Serial Rapist Assumption," Swartout and colleagues (1) introduce a restrictive definition of "serial rapist," present findings from complex analyses of two datasets, and claim their results challenge the "assumption" that the majority of (campus) rapists are serial rapists and serial rapists commit the great majority of rapes (2).

We have reviewed the data they used (and the full, public version of the "derivation" dataset) and their analysis code. This revealed several problems that call into question their findings, interpretations and conclusions.

Their restrictive definition of "serial rapist" suppresses the numbers of serial rapists by excluding attempted rapes and requiring rape perpetration during more than one assessment period. Inspection of the publicly available derivation dataset reveals that men who raped more than twice, even more than five times, during a single year of college, even as indicated by responses to a single survey item, were not defined as serial rapists. Also, frequency analyses reveal that for the period before college (ages 14-18), and for every year of college, at least 50% of rapists were serial rapists (as typically defined, i.e., men committing more than one rape) who perpetrated large majorities of all rapes.

Inspection of the full public version of "derivation" dataset also reveals significant data integrity issues. For example, in some cases missing data on sexual assault items were assigned as "no rape."

Finally, running their analysis code reveals significant problems. The derivation model differs from what is reported in the article; data from the senior year of college, rather than being omitted, as is stated in the article, are included and contribute formatively to the trajectory classes. The model imposes parameter constraints that force a linear trajectory on rape probability (latent trajectory class model), but no evidence is provided to support this rigid structure, and an alternative model lacking these constraints (latent profile model) reveals evidence that the probability of raping at one timepoint is not conditioned on rape at a previous timepoint in a way that can be described by a linear trajectory. Also, standard model fit criteria are not established, as revealed by (a) warnings generated in the Mplus statistical program output for the derivation dataset and (b) the fact that, to identify the model and complete its estimation, trajectory parameters were fixed by Mplus at values not selected *a priori* or based on theory, thus incapable of empirical evaluation.

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Additional Contributions: Kevin M. Swartout, PhD, provided the analysis dataset and Mplus code used for the original article. Jacquelyn W. White, PhD, assisted Drs. Tracy and Hopper in their efforts to understand the publicly available version of the derivation dataset and its relationship to the analysis dataset used for the article and provided by Dr. Swartout.

REFERENCES

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2. Lisak D, Miller PM. Repeat rape and multiple offending among undetected rapists. Violence Vict, 2002 Feb;27(1):73-84.