Author’s response to reviews

Title: Validity of self-reported criminal behaviour in substance abusing women at five-year follow-up

Authors:

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Author’s response to reviews:

Reviewer’s report
Title: Validity of self-reported criminal behaviour in substance abusing women at five-year follow-up
Version: 1 Date: 18 September 2007
Reviewer: Daryl G Kroner
Reviewer’s report:
General
The authors are to be commended for conducting this type of research with such an understudied sample. The results have implications for the general assessment of substance abuse among women.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

A potential alternate explanation for longer-term recall is that the recall may be more a result of memory and therefore have less to do with a psychometric issue, such as the validity of self-report. It is recommended that the data be split, not according to each year, but by combining the current and previous year, and then comparing this grouping to the previous 3 years. This should help tease out the psychometric vs. memory issue.

! We tried this analysis, and are greatful for the suggestion.

It was not clearly stated what was the binary outcome for the logistic analyses. What happened if there were more than one count of an event in a 6-month time period? In this case, logistic regression would not be appropriate. Count based statistics would be more appropriate.

! We did not ask the informants about the number of events, so count based
statistics would not represent a good match between the information from the two sources of information. Instead, we simply asked them whether or not they had been charged with an offence.

The Discussion should contain explanations of why there are differences among the types of outcome. Is there less congruence with violence among these women because of how much a threat it is to admit to violence? Or is it because this behaviour is not normative for this group, whereas, with a criminal sample such behaviour will be more normative, and therefore more likely to be reported.

We have now added a section about these issues to the discussion.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

For ease of reading, the description of what a false-positive/negative are should be covered in the introduction. In the discussion, the coverage of false positive and false-negative needs to be placed in the context of previous research. Is this research similar to that of other research? Are the results a function of a women sample?

! We have now added this issue.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Statistically, the authors may want to consider ROC analyses. This statistic is less sensitive to base-rates.

! This is correct, if one of the scales is at least an ordinal scale. However, since both are essentially measured as dichotomous variables, we cannot use ROC analyses to directly compare the two sources of information. We could, of course, use the number of offences as a predictor of self-reporting being charged, under the assumption that the likelihood of remembering having been charged increases with each new charge. However, we do not consider this a directly relevant question for the issue of validity.

Having the term "women" in the concluding sentence of the abstract would be helpful.

We have now added the word "women".

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

We have looked through the language again.
Reviewer’s report

Title: Validity of self-reported criminal behaviour in substance abusing women at five-year follow-up

Version: 1 Date: 4 September 2007

Reviewer: Norman G Poythress

Reviewer’s report:

Review for BMC Psychiatry:

¿Validity of Self-reported Criminal Behaviour in Substance Abusing Women at Five-year Follow-up

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?
Previous investigators have explored the general question posed by these authors; however, the current research appears to be rather unique in extending this research question to a female sample of substance-abusing women.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

Minor Essential Revisions.

The critical issue in this research is the extent to which participants accurately reported specific charges by the police within discrete time frames in a retrospective interview. Thus, it would be desirable to see 1 or more examples of the specific questions used to solicit this information. This would show the reader (and investigators who might aspire to replicate this research) the structure of inquiries in this study. E.g.,

A. How specific were the instructions to participants regarding dates (¿In the past six months ¿ ¿ versus ¿Between April 1, 2000 and Sept. 30, 2000, ¿ ¿)

B. Were the queries in recall format (¿During period X, what criminal charges were placed against you? ¿) or some type of recognition format (¿During period X, were you charged with theft? Were you charged with any crime against a person? Were you charged with violating a drug law?)

! The questions have now been added in the methods section.

Also, how did the authors deal with the issue of potentially changing charges? I know little about how these things work in Sweden, but in the US a defendant¿s initial charges may change over time, e.g., as a result of plea negotiations. Did the authors have a strategy for exploring crime-related events that occurred very near the end of their discrete 6-month windows? A defendant may have been
officially charged with theft just 4-5 days prior to the end of a particular 6-month window but, due to imprecise memory, report having been charged in the following 6-month period. Any brief description as to whether/how these issues were considered would be helpful.

! Charges were included if charges were raised. However, plea bargain is not possible in Sweden.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?

Minor Essential Revisions.

Clarification of Sample. The original sample consisted of 132 women, 12 were excluded from follow-up due to consent issues or death, leaving a possible 120 to be interviewed. 109 were interviewed, so the reader is left wondering about the 11 additional missing cases. The authors should briefly clarify.

! The remaining 11 were lost to follow-up. This is now stated in the sample description. We did not conduct statistical analyses of attrition, due to the small number of subjects.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

Major Essential Revisions.

It may be just me, but despite reading the text several times I had a bit of trouble understanding some of the data in Table 1. I thought I understood it until I looked at the row of data for Drug-related Offences for year 0. As best I understand it, 43 people were interviewed regarding drug charges during the year of the interview, but none (0%) of these individuals actually had charges. These people must have reported something about being charged with drug-related offenses (Yes I was Charged, or, No I wasn’t charged), so why cannot a %-agreement be calculated?

! This was an error on our side. Even with a 0 cell, a % agreement can be calculated, and we have now added it.

I also found the definitions on page 6 for false negatives (described as a function of all subjects) and false positives (described as a function of all women) on page 6 to be confusing. First, it seems from the sample description that all subjects = women, so using different terms here is confusing. Second, clearer definitions of these terms are needed. If I understand the authors’ intent here, it seems that the false negative rate is the proportion of those participants for whom official records indicate that an event did occur (charge for a particular offense type, or being placed in prison) that denied such an event occurred; a false positive rate would be the proportion of those participants for whom official records indicate that an event did not occur (charge for a particular offense type, or being placed in prison) that nevertheless claimed that such an event did occur. Whatever their intent, the text could be clearer.
The reviewer is correct. We have changed the text.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
   Yes

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions
Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests