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A Different Focus for Risk Assessment Tools for Sexually Abusive Youth

L. C. Miccio-Fonseca, Ph.D.

A closer examination of the efficacy of risk assessment tools in assessing sexually abusive youth continues to evolve in professional conversations, and with good reason. The research on the predictive validity, that is, the accuracy rate of these measures, has consistently demonstrated “mixed results” (Fanniff & Letourneau, 2012; Viljoen et al., 2008; Viljoen, Mordell, & Beneteau, 2012). These emerging conversations are opportunities to bring about corrective steps that align the field of risk assessment of sexually abusive youth (adjudicated and non-adjudicated) with the expected quality standard for accurate, scientifically sound tools.

When risk assessment tools for youth made their initial debut in the early 2000’s (i.e., *Juvenile Sexual Offender Assessment Protocol [J-SOAP-II - Prentky & Righthand, 2003]; Estimate of Risk of Adolescent Sexual Offense Recidivism [ERASOR, Version 2 - Worling & Curwen, 2001]*), they were quickly adopted and implemented almost immediately. The need for such instruments was so high that any real close scrutiny in the form of independent study did not come about until about 7 years later (Martinez, Flores, & Rosenfeld, 2007; Viljoen, Elkovitch, Scalora, & Ullman, 2009). Independent studies showed disappointing results that rang the bell of caution by respected researchers with regard to employing these measures (Fanniff and Letourneau, 2012; Viljoen et al., 2012). Worling, one of the authors of the *ERASOR*, recently informed the field that he was discontinuing *his* use of the *ERASOR*, since “the average degree of accuracy is poor for making forensic decisions”; (Worling, 2017, June, website).

There are multiple reasons for the mixed research on the predictive validity of risk assessment tools in assessing sexually abusive youth. The initial efforts to create these tools relied to a certain extent on research literature on risk factors of convicted adult male sex offenders youth (Prentky, Harris, Frizzell, & Righthand, 2000; Worling & Curwen, 2001). Independent researchers examining the *JSOAP-II* later pointed out that some of these risk factors were not applicable to youth (Powers-Sawyer & Miner, 2009). Likewise, Worling noted that one reason he discontinued his use of the *ERASOR* was that risk factors thought to be applicable to youth when the tool was created “are NOT presently supported by current literature” (Worling, 2017). Contrary to psychometric standards of tool construction, *J-SOAP-II* and *ERASOR* were not validated on large representative samples, and only one study (Prentky et al., 2010) had a large (over 500 subjects) cross-validation sample. Another measure, the *Juvenile Sexual Offense Recidivism Risk Assessment Tool-II (JSORRAT-II – Epperson & Ralston, 2015)*, was adopted (endorsed) and made part of state policies *prior* to the needed completed cross validation research, and before independent studies were completed (Judicial Council of California/Administrative Office of the Courts, 2012; State of California, State Authorized Risk Assessment Tool for Sex Offenders Review Committee, 2017).

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There is no standard operational definition of recidivism (predictive variable) as different studies have used various definitions (e.g., arrest, charge, adjudicating, new report of sexual behaviors – see Viljoen et al., 2012). Mixed predictive validity findings have also been perpetuated by a tendency to view lower rates of accuracy as somehow acceptable (i.e., Area Under the Curve [AUC's] of less than 70). For example, in a study comparing risk assessment tools, Viljoen, Elkovitch, Scalora, and Ullman (2009), reported, “Although ERAOR total score were non-significant, structured professional judgement on this tool nearly reached significance (AUC = 0.64; $p < .069$)” (p. 994). “*Nearly*” reaching significance is still *not* significant. These are just some of the possible reasons for mixed research on predictive validity of risk assessment tools for youth.

Re-examining the efficacy of risk assessment tools for sexually abusive youth, will hopefully bring about a stricter adherence to the American Psychological Association (APA) gold standard on tests and measurement (i.e., large representative construction samples, ethnically diverse samples, clear operational definitions of recidivism variables, validation and cross-validation studies, etc.). Results of such steps would likely evidence more reliable and accurate measures.

Assessing the youth's *risk level* may hold more promise in an improved accuracy rate than attempting to “predict” recidivism. The *risk level* of the youth varies, likely relating to gender and age. A particular method of statistical analysis (i.e., calibration) can examine if in fact the calculation of the *risk level* of the youth is accurate. Accurately assessing the youth's risk level may better determine the specific level of service and supervision needed, accruing benefits for the youth, their family, and community.

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