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Country Music, Suicide, and Spuriousness*

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Abstract

Stack and Gundlach (1992) tested and supported the hypothesis that the greater the air time devoted to country music in metropolitan areas, the greater the white suicide rate will be. We could not replicate this effect (Maguire & Snipes 1994), and Stack and Gundlach (1994) responded with a criticism of our methods, more specifically demonstrating measurement error in our construction of suicide rates. Here we show that this criticism sidesteps our most relevant critique of their study. Yet, we heed their advice, reattempt the replication using their own white suicide data, and still fail to produce a significant effect of country music on white suicide. Although the two are related bivariately, controlling for divorce, poverty, southern region, and gun availability results in a near-zero multivariate effect.

Following the recent wave of research on the relationship between culture and destructive behavior, Stack and Gundlach (1992) conducted a study of the relationship between country music and suicide. Analyzing data from 49 metropolitan areas, they found a significant effect of country music air time on white suicide rates, controlling for southern region, poverty, divorce, and gun availability. In a subsequent replication attempt (Maguire & Snipes 1994), we could not reproduce this effect, finding instead no multivariate association between the two constructs. Stack and Gundlach (1994) responded with a criticism of our methods. The purpose of this article is to readdress the issue, showing that — at least in Stack and Gundlach's sample of metropolitan areas — country music air time is unrelated to white suicide rates.

Stack and Gundlach have responded to our critique of their study on country music and suicide in an understandable fashion. They side-step our fundamental criticism (that their country music data does not come from the source it is supposed to have come from) and address an issue that is irrelevant (the definition of metropolitan areas). In their original article, Stack and

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TABLE 1: Relationship of Country Music to Suicide

Controls	Beta
None	.46***
Divorce	.24
Divorce and poverty	.15
Divorce, poverty, and southern region	.08
Divorce, poverty, southern region, and gun availability	.05

(N = 48)

[a] In our original critique we used all fifty metropolitan areas for which country music were available. However, the WSR data provided by Stack and Gundlach contain data for only 48 of these locations.

*** $p < .001$. None of the other betas were significant at the .05 level.

Gundlach reported that their country music came from the 1985 *Radio and Records Rating Report.* We obtained this data from the source, and used it in all our analyses. Although this was the data listed in their references, we subsequently learned from them that *they did not use this data.* This comports well with our original suspicion that "the discrepancy may be based on a misrecording of the country music data" (Maguire & Snipes 1994).

In their rejoinder to our critique, Stack and Gundlach employ four measures of country music: (1) data from Maguire and Snipes, which is the exact data listed in their original article as *their* source, (2) *Radio and Records Rating Report* 1986, (3) Stack and Gundlach data, for which no source is listed, and (4) mean of 1985-86 data. The use of all these data sources is puzzling, especially since they did not really use the data listed in their original references. We have no indication of the source for the Stack and Gundlach country music data which they discuss in their rejoinder.

They address this issue only indirectly by arguing that "our" country music data is highly correlated with theirs. This does not, of course, mean that the various measures are interchangeable. For example, their country music data is correlated with southern region (a binary variable with *no* controversy in its measure) with a Pearson *r* of .26. The correlation between our country music and southern region, on the other hand, is .60.[1] Given that their primary independent variable has been inaccurately recorded, resulting in substantially

inaccurate correlations between it and other independent variables, it seems unnecessary to address measurement error in the dependent variable.

Stack and Gundlach argue that the contradictory findings between the studies is due to the discrepancy in the suicide rates. To show that this is not true, we simply substituted their suicide rates for ours and reran the model. After the substitution, the effect of country music remained insignificant. We found the same bivariate correlation between country music and suicide that Stack and Gundlach report in their rejoinder ($r = .46$); thus these data are not an issue in this analysis. Our results confirm our initial suspicion that there is no direct relationship between country music and suicide. Rather, as Table 1 shows, the relationship is spurious, attributable primarily to the effects of divorce and poverty, and to a lesser extent southernness and gun availability.

This is an *exact reproduction* using the *exact same data sources* of the model which Stack and Gundlach reported in their initial article. Because they questioned our critique on the basis of our white suicide rates, we simply replaced our rates with theirs (which they sent to us) and reran the model. They also pointed out that our control variables will be flawed to the extent that the populations in their denominators are not matched with the mortality areas. To correct for this, we took the area definitions sent to us by Stack and Gundlach, and calculated populations, divorce rates, and poverty rates, according to these mappings. As shown in Table 1, the effect of country music becomes insignificant when we introduce controls into the model.

Although we cannot speculate on why Stack and Gundlach, in their rejoinder, did not replace their country music data with ours (with which we provided them) and rerun the full multivariate model, it seems that this would have been the most convincing method of showing our original analysis to be faulty. Regardless of the ambiguity in *why* our analysis fails to replicate Stack and Gundlach's findings, this exchange has been important in showing how the smallest fluctuations in data measurement and analysis techniques can affect the conclusions of studies using small samples at the aggregate level.

Notes

1. This is for the 50 cities in our sample. For the 48 cities which are in both our data set and Stack and Gundlach's, this correlation is .57.

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