Reviewer’s report

Title: Family Functioning in the Aftermath of a Natural Disaster

Version: 2 Date: 27 January 2012

Reviewer: Richard E Adams

Reviewer’s report:

All of my comments below fall into the minor essential revision category, except point 3, which is discretionary.

This study focuses on family functions and its effects on child psychopathology following exposure to a natural disaster (e.g., cyclone). The sample size is a convenience sample of 145. The measures and analyses are appropriate for the research question and there are some interesting results, even if most are null findings. I also liked the use of the SDQ. Thus, I have mostly minor to moderate level changes that I think can make the paper stronger.

First, the location of the study should be given in the Abstract.

Second, there literature review cites relatively few studies on disasters and children’s mental health. A more extensive list of citations and discussion of children’s mental health and family functioning after a disaster is warranted. For example, there are studies of children’s mental health after the Oklahoma City bombing, the World Trade Center terrorist attacks, and the tsunami around the Bay of Bengal which are important and need to be discussed, even if only to show just how few of them deal with family functioning.

Third, I would like a more detailed description of North Queensland in the first paragraph of the Methods section: the general demographics of the state and general social context where the population lives. I am not asking for a lot of details; just enough for someone who is not very familiar with this part of Australia, like me. I would also like some details about the response to the disaster by government and non-governmental agencies. Again, just enough to give the reader a sense of what the social context was like in the three month period after the disaster.

Fourth, I think that the authors need to make a stronger case for why children’s post-disaster psychological problems are included as an independent variable, rather than a dependent variable. I realize that the focus is on family functioning, but the literature review left me with the impression that this variable was to be used to explain children’s psychological health, especially the last paragraph of the literature review.

Fifth, there needs to be some explanation about how the convenience sample was developed. In what way was it a convenience sample and how did the authors settle on the 145 children in the study? How many families were
contacted who refused to participate? Since PTSD was assessed based on children’s answers on the survey, I would like to know the age range of the children. What is the reliability of the measure for quite young children? Finally, what are the implications of how the sample was drawn for the study’s results?

Sixth, the authors need to give some detail about the epidemiological study that they use of comparison purposes. Who collected the data, what was the response rate, and did it cover the same area as the sample? In addition, I never did get a good sense about why the authors included this comparison sample in their analysis.

Seventh, I would like to see more connection between the Conclusion and what the authors discussed in the literature review. For example, they mention Hobfoll’s Conservation of Resources perspective, but do not bring it up in the Conclusion. In addition, the authors mention how they did not collect income data due to the sensitivity of studying survivors of this disaster. It would be instructive, in my view, if they could discuss this issue further and give some possible guidance to future researchers investigating a community disaster. The intrusiveness of researchers in the lives of trauma survivors was also an issue for researchers of the Oklahoma City bombing and the World Trade Center terrorist attacks. I suspect the same is true for studies of earthquake survivors or individuals exposed to the Bay of Bengal tsunami.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.