Reviewer's report

Title: Understanding psychological distress among mothers in rural Nepal: a qualitative grounded theory exploration

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Reviewer: Maria Muzik

Reviewer's report:

Review BMC Psychiatry “Understanding psychological distress among mothers in rural Nepal: a qualitative grounded theory exploration”

M. Muzik

The current manuscript aims to explore the concept of psychological distress in a sample of mothers in Dhanusha, a low resource geographic area in rural Nepal. They used interviews and focus groups as methodology, and the participants were mostly recruited through piggybacking on another study (a RCT intervention study to reduce child mortality in Dhanusha region). As part of this RCT outcomes evaluation they had collected GHQ-12 distress self-ratings; in order to obtain reports from women with postnatal distress on illness conceptualization and help-seeking /coping behaviors, the researchers obtained qualitative interviews for 22 mothers with high scores (>=5); in addition other mothers and female community members were interviewed or attended FGs, and one traditional healer was interviewed as well. Data analysis is based on grounded theory (Strauss), and is elaborated on with appropriate level of detail; methodology was sound and the authors appropriately discuss limitations (e.g., that theoretical sampling was not possible as all data had been collected prior to analyses starting). Results are intriguing and interesting. The authors nicely develop a conceptual model for psychological distress (core construct “tension”) and elaborate on it. The quotes illustrate nicely the model. The data is rich and again quotes are illustrative. I would have liked to see more linkage to demographics in data presentation; how did for example, religion play into the construct of tension, strategies for coping etc. The discussion section is organized coherently, and three main elaboration are presented: 1) tension as construct and how it relates to Western psychiatric diagnosis; 2) a feminist /gender-based victimization perspective, with some exploration on validity of Western feminist approach to the Nepalese women internalized approach to accept status quo., and 3) (an elaboration on 2) the women’s perspective on what they accept as status quo and what “interventions” for the problem tension they would see acceptable.

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- Minor Essential Revisions:
Several elaborations would be useful to enhance clarity of the manuscript and also make it stronger and richer. I would trust the authors to make these additions, although they are beyond just spelling errors. These requests for elaboration are listed below:

The GHQ-12; while this instrument has been widely used in screening for psychiatric morbidity worldwide, there has been some recent concern whether the instrument is in fact a reliable screener. E.g., Hankins, BMC PH 2008, 8:355. Please elaborate on this a bit more, possibly in limitation section. Please elaborate/cite rationale for the cut-off >=5. Please cite a validation study for GHQ-12 for Nepalese women.

The description of the original cRCT study is confusing and it would be helpful to have some more elaboration beyond the one citation. How many women were in original study; how many scored >=8 in total (as all of those were recruited to this study)? How many declined participation for this piggybacked study? Also it is a bit unclear who exactly was then recruited for interview and who for focus group from the parent study, how many were mothers? How many group facilitators, how many from the community involved in the study and how many from parent-study-unrelated communities?. I suggest to make a flow chart for recruitment and indicate sample size for each recruitment arm.

Overall a wide range of respondents, with diverse educational/religious, socioeconomic spread, was sampled- a definite strength of this study; I suggest a more stringent description of recruitment and sample characteristic to make easier for reader to get the full richness of this group. Instrument development was appropriate (translation to local language), community feedback on interview guide, and data collection (focus group leaders) by local women.

It is helpful to put the participants’ demographics in context to the region, and I appreciated the overall geographic descriptors and the tables (1+2) depicting the participant’s education, age range and religious affiliation. I wonder whether the authors could make more use of the demographics, literacy, religious affiliations etc of their participants for a more elaborate/richer interpretation of their narrative data? (e.g., common or differential themes across Hindu and Muslim mothers?)

Regarding data collection/analysis: Here a statement to clarify would be helpful as to the how the data collection for this study intersects with data collection of the parent study (the cRCT) ; it seems that the data analysis following grounded theory was an after-thought to the original qualitative data collection, and this should be openly stated. If this is not the case, it needs to be clarified as it seems confusing.

The paragraph on roles in data collection and analysis is confusing/irritating and seems more appropriate in acknowledgement section. Make sure that all authors are accounted for, I felt AC was left out.

There is no discussions on IRB approval from local committee on the presented study (just on parent cRCT)- was there a second consenting? Again, this may be
just confusing as these studies may be all part of one. Also, were any men in this narrative study?; were participants reimbursed for interviews or FGs?

Overall, this is a strong and in most passages well-written paper; it would benefit from some clarifications around methodology and some elaborations in results and discussion section.

**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'