Reviewer's report

Title: How do adolescents talk about self-harm? A qualitative study of disclosure in an ethnically diverse urban population in England

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Reviewer: Jo Robinson

Reviewer's report:

Many thanks for asking me to review this article, which addresses an important topic. I have made some comments below which I hope the authors will find helpful.

In the ‘Background’ section the authors discuss the potential benefits of investigating personal accounts of self-harm in terms of educating health professionals. However another important dimension that is not mentioned here, yet is a key feature of the results section, is the information that such a study can elicit regarding the various barriers to help seeking. As this becomes an important aspect of the paper I think that it needs to be set up adequately in this introductory section.

In contrast, a lot of emphasis is given to the value of collecting data from ethnically diverse populations (including in the study title), yet this in the end does not feature strongly in the ‘Results’ section. Indeed the authors raise a number of valid and important points, however they are not addressed by this manuscript.

Therefore my advice is to restructure the introduction section in line with the rest of the manuscript.

In the ‘Methods’ section the authors report that data on ethnicity were collected using an adapted version of the census question – it might be worth explaining this in more detail, in particular for the benefit of readers from outside of the UK. If ethnicity continues to be a feature of the paper it will be important to better understand how this was classified.

In the paragraph beginning: “Thirty participants were purposively selected…” the authors state that the aim was to ensure representation across ‘experiences’ of self-harm – and classify this as “never, once, more than once” – this to me is more about the frequency of self-harm rather than the ‘experience’.

In the section entitled ‘Data analysis’, the authors mention a “framework approach” – I think more detail would be helpful here.

They should also detail what support systems were in place for students during the course of the study – what happened if students became distressed during the course of either the questionnaire or interview? And what referral or support
systems were in place for students who presented as high risk? I think this is important given the vulnerable nature of this population.

Results: I would be tempted to restructure this slightly so that the first heading is “Students who have self-harmed” with a sub-heading “Nature of self-harm” which to me better reflects the content of this paragraph. The authors should also double-check the consistency of their headings and participant labels) throughout the section.

On page 14, in the section headed “Talking about self-harm: adolescents who had not self-harmed”, the authors explain the purpose of interviewing students who had not self-harmed – this might sit better in the ‘methods’ section. In this same paragraph, the authors mention that the students who had never harmed themselves associated self-harm with suicide – did those who had self harmed make the same association?

The section on ‘Culture, family and self-harm’ – I think this section is a bit light-on given the emphasis given to this by the study title and background section. I would also be interested to know if any of the participants talked about cultural issues as a barrier to help-seeking. I think this is also an important issue that would have implications for culturally sensitive health / support services.

Discussion: I think more discussion on barriers to help-seeking would be valuable here, including some discussion as to the ways such barriers could be addressed by services. There is a wealth of literature on this that the authors could draw upon, including papers discussing cultural issues.

It may also be worth drawing upon the literature around professionals’ attitudes towards people who self harm; again there is a wealth of literature on this including studies that describe negative attitudes towards people who seek help following self harm which would be relevant here, particularly in light of student’s concerns as to how they would be perceived for their self-harm.

As previously, the authors talk a lot about ethnicity in the ‘discussion’ section, yet as noted above the results on this topic are limited. I think this needs some thought and re-balancing throughout the manuscript.

In the final paragraph the authors make some suggestions regarding interventions suitable for schools - I would draw their attention to the following paper that reports on a training program for school staff, specifically around the management of self harm – ‘Robinson et al (2008). Managing deliberate self-harm in young people: an evaluation of a training program developed for school welfare staff using a longitudinal research design’ which may be of interest.

Overall I think this is a useful paper and I hope the comments made above are helpful.