Reviewer's report

Title: Help-seeking before and after episodes of self-harm: A qualitative and quantitative study in school pupils in England

Version: 1 Date: 26 October 2007

Reviewer: Frank Deane

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General
This is an extremely interesting and useful study that attempts to understand the sources and barriers to help amongst adolescents who have engaged in deliberate self harm. The strength of the paper is the rich narrative descriptions that are provided by the young people themselves in response to open-ended questions. In general, these are well organised into themes. Although the title indicates that this is a “qualitative and quantitative study”, the quantitative component is pretty limited to the use of percentages to describe such things as the proportion of boys or girls who responded under particular themes. There are no formal statistical tests on any of these comparisons, so I would argue they still generally be considered descriptive data. As a result I the title could replace "qualitative and quantitative" with "descriptive".

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1. The authors need to clarify whether Deliberate Self Harm was defined in the survey for the adolescents.
2. The authors do not sufficiently highlight the limitations of their study. For example, the study relies on retrospective recall of “lifetime” DSH behaviours and then a need to try to recall their help seeking barriers and behaviours in relation to this. It is unclear how long ago the DSH occurred for each person so not estimates can be made regarding the likely impact. Limitations associated with accurate recall (and others) need to be noted. I also think the authors need to highlight that for some "comparisons" (e.g., gender) the numbers are very small and great caution is needed not to overgeneralise from the low frequencies.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. The last sentence of the Abstract is a bit awkward (circular) and needs to be revised.
2. p. 4 line 1. “DSH” should be in full for first use.
3. p. 4 line 1. delete “based on youngsters” – redundant.
4. p. 4 paragraph 2 line 4. Sentence starting “However, the reliance….was relatively greater in the first two groups”. Delete “relatively” and provide a description of the first two groups. Ie. “those who had thought about or actually self harmed compare to other pupils”?

5. p. 7 line 4. “Murray [21] proposed…” There is not detail or substance about Murray’s model and how prior help seeking is thought to influence future help seeking. So it is unclear why this is raised here.

6. p. 8 Method. What was the mean age of the students?

7. p. 8 para 2 line 3 “…had had engaged…”, delete one.

8. p. 9 in Results section line 3 after “…the study 5293 …” (88%) should be added.

9. p. 10 first line “figure 1” should be “Figure 1”.

10. p. 10 para. 2 first sentence is awkward and needs revision. Perhaps “…of DSH were identified from a list that was provided (see Table 1).”

11. I am not really convinced that the “model of help seeking” outlined in Figure 2 is a significant addition to previous models of help seeking. For example, Saunders (1993, 1996) has specified a model that outlines steps in the treatment seeking process. (also see Saunders et al., (2006). Person-related and treatment-related barriers to alcohol treatment. Journal of Substance Abuse, 261-270. Further, there is no real explanation about how previous experiences of help work to influence the process. There is also a mismatch between stage 4 described on p. 11 “barriers to help-seeking” and stage 4 in Figure 2 “Decision to seek help”. This needs clarification.

12. p. 11 first sentence under “spur of the moment” heading is awkward and needs revision.

13. p. 12 formatting of 2nd last quote. Undo left and right justification.

14. p. 13 the sentence after the third quote is in italics but should not be italicised. Ie. “This was a theme mentioned…”

15. p. 13 under “Life or my problems have changed”, third quote. Can the authors clarify whether the word “find” is accurate or whether it should be “fine”?

16. p. 25 para 3 first line “…the majority of whom had not sought…” insert the percentage after “whom”.

17. p. 25 para 3. I am not sure exactly how the new model “extends previous models”. The authors need to be a bit more specific about what extensions are offered (besides being based on a larger sample size than other studies).

18. p. 35 Table 1. While there is likely to be some shift in percentages due to rounding this should generally not be greater than one percent. There are a couple of totals that need checking. For “Friend” column 1 indicates “40%” but the mean of Male and Female is 38%. For “Telephone helpline” column 1 indicates 8% but the mean of male and female is 6.5%. Can these be checked, corrected or explained?

19. Figure 1. can percentages be inserted following the various n’s on the right
hand side of the figure.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

p. 7 para 2. The first sentence is too long and should be broken into two sentences.

p. 24. The section on “Previous help-seeking experiences”. I am not sure that this section really offers much given that there were only three comments made about previous experiences of trying to get help. What it says to me is that previous experiences of help do not feature very strongly, but it is unclear to what extent the methodology really “pulls for” these responses. So, it may be more of a method artefact rather than previous help-seeking experience being of low importance. I would be interested in the authors thoughts on this issue.

p. 27 para 1. last line “depressive cognition”, is probably better described as “negative cognition”.

p. 28 para 2. Line 5 “Boys were more likely to express these views”. Whilst this might be accurate, a number of the gender comparisons involved very small numbers of boys and girls. I'm not exactly sure about the absolute numbers related to this statement, but some caution might be needed.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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'