Reviewer’s report

Title: Hope against hope: Exploring the hopes and challenges of rural female caregivers of persons with advanced cancer

Version: 3 Date: 16 May 2013

Reviewer: Laura Funk

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Review of “Hope against hope: exploring the hopes and challenges of rural female caregivers of persons with advanced cancer”

General Comments

This is an interesting article on an important topic, and has considerable application potential. I appreciated the unique presentation of the fictional yet evidence-based story in the findings section. Below I outline the revisions I’d like to see before publication, that would I feel result in a top quality paper. Primarily this involves developing the analysis, and presenting a stronger rationale for/explanation of the analysis, as detailed below.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Since one of the key findings was that family caregivers actively sought to create hope in order to cope (indeed, this process was actively encouraged through the LWHP program), I think this should be drawn out more in relation to a constructionist perspective. Please see: Funk, L.M. & Stajduhar, K.I. (2009). Interviewing family caregivers: implications of the caregiving context for the research interview. Qualitative Health Research, 19(6), 859-67 (though it focuses on interviewing, I think some of the points made about differing approaches to analyzing data on family caregiver coping is relevant, and in particular, the references to how meaning-making is a form of coping. The finding in the present paper about the active construction of hope could also be grounds for discussion about the dominant construction of hope as a personal resource or characteristic – versus a fluid, ongoing process that can be actively encouraged. Is hope a resource, an objective experience, a process, a construction, etc? At the very least, the discussion should incorporate attention to these issues. However:

...given that the LWHP program facilitated a process of cognitively reframing their experience, one suggestion (that would fall under ‘discretionary revisions’) is to present the paper as an examination of the process by which caregivers reframe their experiences, and to examine how the concept of hope may or may not be helpful in that regard, as it is reframed in response to objective conditions and realities of caregiving. In other words, I think the analysis actually hints at far more than a descriptive exploration of the hopes and challenges of this group of caregivers, and this could be acknowledged explicitly in the paper (possibly even through a revised title, though I don’t think that is essential).
2. In the abstract, please cite the specific research question for the analysis presented in this paper. Likewise, at the end of the literature review there should be a clear statement of the research question guiding this particular analysis. This could also be restated at the end of the method section (before data collection), where you could provide a general summary of the overall approach to this study and a clear research question (not specifically the analysis as yet) before transitioning into the data collection section. Relatedly, in the intro and method sections, clarify how this analysis is related to the evaluation of the LWHP program. Is the paper more of a secondary analysis focused on the concept of hope and its meaning, rather than a program evaluation?

3. In ‘Introduction/Background’
   • A stronger rationale is needed up front for why we should study hope (perhaps both a theoretical and/or applied rationale). How is connected, if at all, to ‘relational and contextual’ influences on family caregiving? It is unclear (you may want to remove the reference to ‘relational/contextual’ influences?)

4. The following article is a foundational theoretical objectivist concept analysis of hope and includes the theme of “hoping against hope” – Morse, J.M., and Doberneck, B. (1995). “Delineating the concept of hope.” Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 27(4), 277-285. I would suggest referring to it and ideally explaining how your findings relate to the concept as outlined by these authors.

5. Re: data collection and analysis sections: How were participants recruited? Why were only women recruited? How was sample size determined? Please also state in the text of the paper which authors actively participated in the analysis (e.g. ‘the first, second and third authors’ etc). The analysis appears to have been collaborative between three of the authors – explain how this was achieved.

6. Re: analysis: Why was Corazzi’s method used? How were the findings from that part of the analysis used in relation to or separate from the thematic analysis and writing of the story? In the findings section, it is unclear how the analysis based on Corazzi’s method was relevant to the findings as they are currently presented...the findings, unless I’m mistaken, appear to be derived primarily from the thematic analysis? Please clarify, or consider breaking the findings into three steps representing the findings from each of the three phases of analysis.

7. Findings section: Ultimately the ‘compulsory revision’ I’m seeking is for less ‘breadth’ and more ‘depth’ to be represented in the analysis/findings. How you do that specifically is ultimately up to you, and the following are some recommendations (addressing Point 1 above would also be helpful in this regard):
   a) Though three of the four themes were less directly related to hope yet “are interconnected with and influence hope,” as the findings are currently presented, it is not clear that those other themes strongly relate to the research focus of the study. I would suggest either more clearly developing the presentation of these sections to focus on the specific links in more depth, or (my preference)
integrating relevant bits from those sections into one overarching findings section that discusses subthemes more directly related to ‘hope’ in greater depth. You could still briefly address some of the ‘challenges’ and ‘emotional journey’ pieces which are more descriptive, perhaps as a lead in to the findings section.

b) Subthemes within hope could also be more clearly identified, perhaps with subheadings, and more in-depth analysis that incorporates more exemplar quotes from the data.

c) When reading the story, I found myself seeking greater analysis (perhaps after the story) of some its main themes or ideas, and/or a paragraph summarizing how the themes in the story relate to the themes that had already been presented. How did writing the story facilitate the development of theoretical ideas about the data? Some of the bolded quotes are very interesting (“I am scared to get my hopes up”; “being constantly reminded that there is no hope,” etc.) and seem to beg further analysis; with other quotes (“I try to be the best person I can be”) I was unsure how they related to hope.

d) In the discussion: actively engage with the idea of whether hope is really any different than coping, and if so, what can you conclude about the concept? Does hope facilitate coping or does the active construction or process of hope represent a form of coping? Further attention to the connection between hope and coping could strengthen the discussion and help identify the theoretical contributions of the study.

e) Another very interesting piece of the analysis was the idea that ‘to hope against hope’ is a kind of paradox, an active struggle, or that hope and no hope can co-exist (or is this an unresolved tension?)...this too could be extended further/reflected upon analytically in the findings or discussion, as could the idea about ‘hoping for what’? When there no hope for a cure, caregivers still strove to hope for more specific, daily things, which is interesting and illustrates how we respond to challenging situations.

8. Discussion section: it is noted that caregivers watched a Hope video prior to journaling, and that this may have more actively produced accounts of hope in their journals. Another sentence about the content and recommendations of the video, and how this may have steered the cognitive reframing of participants, should be added.

9. Discussion section: The sample only included female family caregivers. Though acknowledged as a limitation, I would suggest briefly (1 sentence) discussing how women may interpret ‘hope’ or factors that influence it (like social support) differently than male caregivers.

10. As per some of my suggestions above, I think the conclusion could more effectively summarize what was learned about the nature and construction of hope, prior to moving to the focus on applications.

Minor Essential Revisions

• Introduction/Background: Minor writing issues: please rephrase “one way to capture”; see misspelling of “written participant journals” on the first page.
• Literature Review: A clear transition sentence is needed between the section on ‘experiences of caregiving’ and ‘caregiving and hope.’

• Lit Review typo, first sentence of ‘caregiving and hope’ – ‘its relationships to’

• The authors refer to the benefits of journaling, etc. – it may be useful either in the literature review or discussion section to refer to the tradition of “narrative therapy” in narrative gerontology, with specific references (I believe Gary Kenyon and William Randall have both done work on this in Canada)

• Towards the end of the literature review, it is noted that only two papers dealt with hope in advanced cancer – a statement here or earlier is needed to clarify the rationale for why or whether the nature of the concept may differ in situations of advanced cancer.

• I suggest that the first two sentences of the method subsection, and the last paragraph, could be moved to the section describing the analysis.

• The method section notes that narratives are being recognized in palliative care but focuses on the value re: that health care professionals can respond to the stories. The fact that story telling/writing can be therapeutic for the person writing/telling it should also be touched on here (it is mentioned elsewhere but fits in the rationale here).

• See typo/error in last sentence of the data collection section in brackets.

• At the start of the findings section, please provide a brief roadmap statement for the reading outlining how the findings will be presented.

• Findings section: A subheader before the presentation of the story might be helpful, as well as a transition sentence.

Discretionary Revisions

• Personally, I’m wary of the use of the word ‘choice’ in relation to hope – even if caregivers spoke of making a conscious decision to hope (and we may want to help them actively construct it), you may want to include a statement that critically reflects on or cautions against the idea that caregivers simply need to ‘choose’ to cope better with their conditions (i.e., that they also need support). Indeed, internalizing dominant discourses around independence and individual responsibility, caregivers themselves may be ‘individualizing’ their responsibility to maintain their well-being through better personal coping (‘trying harder’) rather than articulating a broader vision of collective action or social responsibility for supporting caregivers.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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.