Reviewer's report

Title: Social gradients in child and adolescent antisocial behaviour: A systematic review protocol.

Version: 1 Date: 16 May 2012

Reviewer: Aron Shlonsky

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Review of 2136698446706571

This protocol covers an immensely important area and is an exciting topic. The protocol proposes to look at the relationship between the social gradient (measure of economic and social standing) and anti-social behaviour. Few social constructs in health science have had as much of an impact as the gradient and it is a worthwhile endeavour. The execution, however, if fraught with challenges and I suspect the authors will pull out more than a few hairs. While I think the authors should proceed with this important review, I also think there needs to be a lot more detail in their planning before proceeding. Hopefully, these comments will assist them to fill in some of the gaps. Most important, their process of selecting and synthesizing studies needs to be considerably expanded.

1. Lit review (discretionary):

Is there room in the lit review for a very short discussion of the social construction of antisocial behaviour (i.e., it is only anti when social is defined as the norm). I don’t think this needs to be very long, but it is worth noting that the DSM criteria for anti-social have been roundly blasted by social scientists for quite some time, and this is particularly the case for linking oppositional defiant disorder with conduct disorder. For a particularly compelling argument, see Kutchins and Kirk ‘Making Us Crazy’.

2. Methods intro (no revisions):

I like that the authors are going after subtypes and even getting at the heritability factor. I suspect that they are correct in assuming there will be variability – that some behaviours are more influenced by the gradient than others.

3. Search (major compulsory revisions):

Searches should include disciplinary databases from these additional disciplines (at least – or a clear rationale as to why this is not important to do):

- Economics (e.g., PAIS; EconLit)
- Sociology (Sociological abstracts; Social Sciences Abstracts)
- Crime and Justice
- Political Science
4. Search terms (minor essential revisions):
- No need for ‘young pe*’ if you include ‘young*’, but you might find ‘young’ gives too many hits. If so, I would include ‘young ad*’ in addition to ‘young pe*’
- include Youth* (to cover youths, youthful, youth-
- include Oppositional defiant (rather than just oppositional-defiant)
- include Poor

5. Inclusion criteria (minor essential revisions):
- When referring to social position, do you mean parent’s social position? How will you define this? What if they are being cared for by someone else? When you say social position, do you mean social position at the time of the survey / study or do you mean exposure to poverty (for example) at any age?
- Why limit to English only when the databases will search terms in other languages? Can’t you sort it out at the end of the day? The likelihood that studies will be found, for example, in the Nordic countries is fairly high (though these may also be in English).

6. Screening (Major compulsory revisions):
Is it being done this way due to resource constraints? Why not follow Cochrane procedures for screening at the various levels. In particular, I’m concerned that there is no mention of training to reliability before the effort gets under way. The 10% second author check is merely a check and will only tell you if things have gone wrong. Better to spend time at the front end, training to reliability, and doing periodic spot checks as you go to make sure reliable decisions are maintained.

7. Analysis (major compulsory revisions):
I think this is the section that needs substantial work. As a reader, I do not have a clear idea as to how these authors will proceed with this rather unwieldy topic.

7a. How will studies be assessed in terms of high or low quality? Also, there may be widely varying study designs. These should probably be ‘lumped’ together, then stratified by risk of bias. Would the authors consider using risk of bias tables? Do these exist for observational studies? There must be an explicit, a-priori and transparent guide to assessing study quality, otherwise it is simply left to the authors’ discretion and someone else might come along and make completely different decisions. I think we want to avoid having two very different conclusions from the same slate of studies! Please be sure to also include a list of excluded studies that make it through initial screening.

7b. How will each of the constructs be measured in this review? For instance, how to we know that someone is anti-social? How do we know when to consider people poor? The term ‘gradient’ implies more than a dichotomous approach (i.e., poor / not poor). How will this be operationalized? Will the psychometric properties of each of the constructs be considered? What if there are none (i.e.,
they have not been tested as will likely be the case for many)? How are you defining ‘general population’? Does the survey have to be representative? Of what? A province? State? Country? City? Representative of what? Child population? Can it be stratified by ethnic group, for instance, to ensure representation? How will you deal with population weights in the review?

7c. I’m also a bit concerned here that the authors seem to be leaning toward a narrative synthesis before the data are in. The studies should be meta-analyzed if at all possible. Heterogeneity can be dealt with if sufficient studies are present (which I think there are! Just the survey data alone will be enormous!). Given this very real possibility, how will the data be analyzed? Specifically, what techniques will be used (e.g., fixed or random effects?)? What meta-analysis program? How will the final slate of studies be assessed for their completeness (e.g., funnel plots, etc)?

I would strongly suggest, wherever possible, following the Cochrane guidelines for screening studies. Although Cochrane is largely focused on effectiveness studies, the public health group has made substantial in-roads into other types of questions.

**Level of interest:** An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests