Reviewer's report

Title: The key therapeutic factors needed to deliver behavioural change interventions to decrease risky substance use (drug and alcohol) for looked after children and care leavers: a qualitative exploration with young people, carers and front line workers

Version: 0 Date: 15 Oct 2018

Reviewer: Reviewer 2

Reviewer's report:

PEER REVIEWER ASSESSMENTS:

OBJECTIVE - Full research articles: is there a clear objective that addresses a testable research question(s) (brief or other article types: is there a clear objective)?

Yes - there is a clear objective

DESIGN - Is the current approach (including controls and analysis protocols) appropriate for the objective?

Yes - the approach is appropriate

EXECUTION - Are the experiments and analyses performed with technical rigor to allow confidence in the results?

No - there are minor issues

INTERPRETATION - Is the current interpretation/discussion of the results reasonable and not overstated?

No - there are minor issues

OVERALL MANUSCRIPT POTENTIAL - Could an appropriately REVISED version of this work represent a technically sound contribution?

Probably - with minor revisions
GENERAL COMMENTS: The objective of this study is to tailor two psychosocial interventions, from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including care leavers, to target population needs and mitigate risks for alcohol and drug use and dependence during the life course. The study sets out to address the specific conflict resulting from research that suggests care leavers' life experience(s) places them at increased risk of using coping strategies that may result in negative health behaviors and outcomes, but at the same time this population also shows low levels of engagement in services, resulting in unmet needs. Overall, the findings from the initial formative phase of a pilot feasibility randomized control trial identify specific strategies for enhancing the interventions to increase population-specific engagement. These enhancements are intriguing because they seek to challenge mistrust, stigma, and a lack of investment that so many foster youth describe in the literature.

Strengths of the manuscript have to do with the rigorous approach given to adapting two psychosocial interventions. The authors start with two promising interventions, consult with the developers, build a theory of change that is specific to career leavers, and then use multiple qualitative methods to increase understanding the needs of this population. The quotations are rich.

Weaknesses have to do with the singular focus given to targeting individual-levels of change rather than to acknowledge or even target the contextual components of care that produce and maintain high levels of mistrust, stigma, lack of control, and imbalances in power between professionals and care leavers. To me, this means that the interventions will likely be partially effective at addressing holistic needs. There are other areas that could also be strengthened including more discussion about how the participants were recruited (e.g., how did the authors recruit care leavers/cared for youth exactly? Did they go through the child authorities, hang up fliers, etc.? Whom does the sample represent? What was their history of alcohol and drug use, other risks? Similarly, it was hard for me to tell who the carers were, how they were recruited and how representative they are to other carers). I was also unsure how the data was analyzed, how different sources of information were integrated, or how the authors integrated strategies for rigor. Last, more elaboration in key areas could also strengthen considerably. What exactly would 'working gradually' look like in a brief intervention? These two ideas seem counterintuitive. What do the authors mean by professional safe-disclosures? Could they give an example to illustrate?

In the back of my head, I also wondered about unintended consequences that could come to care leavers when yet another trusting relationship ends and adds to pile. I assume the intent is to leverage the therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the care leaver to create a secure base from which other secure relationships could then be developed and maintained but this manuscript never takes us that deep or far, making it difficult to say much about best practices or unintended consequences without further testing. There are reasons to proceed with care.
REQUESTED REVISIONS:

To ensure the soundness of the work, this manuscript would benefit from 1) providing more information about sample recruitment and limitations, 2) providing more details about the analysis of data, and their integration; 3) Elaborating on the strategies and providing more examples would also strengthen in key places.

ADDITIONAL REQUESTS/SUGGESTIONS:

There are a few typos throughout. Could the authors provide demographic information about the participants in the study?

Note: This reviewer report can be downloaded - see attached pdf file.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

No

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

No

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Needs some language corrections before being published
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