Reviewer’s report

Title: Ontological security and connectivity provided by pets: A study in the self-management of the everyday lives of people diagnosed with a long-term mental health condition

Version: 0 Date: 16 Aug 2016

Reviewer: Bridget Hamilton

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this work I think the study is important and should be published, because:

* as stated, the extraordinarily powerful role of pets in relationships, wellbeing and recovery is certainly under investigated and under-recognised, and

* the interviews seem rich and very valuable for articulating this aspect of experience, relationship and meaning making.

However, my appreciation of the work is thrown somewhat by the lack of consistency in researcher positioning and the representation of whose meanings are to be conveyed, as expressed through the manuscript. I have attempted below to explain the uncertainty that I experience with aspects of the findings and discussion, as they stand.

On one hand, respectful adoption of the participant perspective seems evident in the tabled descriptions of kinds of work that were explored at interview - I note that this table conspicuously does not refer to illness or chronic illness. On the other hand, the language of chronic illness and illness work features in sections of the writing, including as one analytic/thematic subheading: 'emotional and illness work'. It is unclear if the headlined language of 'illness work' from medical sociology was put directly to participants, ie if the scope and direction of the analysis is in keeping with either the perspectives or the expectations of participants. Likewise, the terminology of 'broken identity' does not obviously arise from the data as presented, but is perhaps assumed, and may derive from a clinical perspective or earlier sociology, and indeed this concept may not be consistent with the data of participant interviews.

So I find that the researcher/s positioning/s implicit in language used in the paper to be troublesome; inconsistent and inadequately accounted for.
I appreciate that the traditional sociological language of 'Illness work' has salience for many people who are self-managing an ongoing illness or a recovery from illness. The seminal paper (Strauss & Corbin 1985) makes reference to persons managing at home post-stroke or post spinal injury, for example. However this same notion of illness work is not without problems when applied in a mental health care context, where people (including likely some of the study participants) may not own the idea of many social experiences and troubles as 'illness' or as chronic illness. There is one data extract where a participant refers to mental illness experience (ID1 p14), and so in this instance the idea of illness work may be a concept that accords with the participant view. However, overall the data presented attests to a sense of stigma or discrimination experienced by participants, that may also be unwittingly under-recognised or overwritten by the researchers' ready designations of illness.

More specifically, the language used in analysis of participant relationships with pets, for example as 'enmeshed', is most probably not consistent with the emic view of extracts and narratives. This somewhat discrediting analysis possibly would not be recognised or welcomed by the participant/s in question. Likewise, introducing the psychodynamic notion of projective identification is clearly a researcher driven perspective that did not evidently accord with the participant's meaning, as displayed in the relevant extract about a participant's relationship with a bird. So I find that the researcher/s positioning/s and language used in the paper to be inconsistent, inadequately accounted for and in a few places mildly pejorative.

The extracts seem to indicate that participant perspectives on the many benefits of pets were predominantly oriented to enhancing life rather than to providing therapy (such as 'behavioural activation' or 'distraction from acute symptoms' that are noted).

So even though the concerns I have detailed relate to aspects of the findings and discussion, it may be that the issue is redressed through additional explanation and reflexivity via in the methodology.

I suggest that the approach to analysis and language use could be explicitly improved in one of two ways:

The findings and discussion could be reviewed with careful and consistent application of the lens of the participant perspectives, as these perspectives are evident and interesting in the rich narratives.

Or
The method, findings and discussion could include an explicit account of the theoretical/clinical overlay that is applied, for example to enable the participant statement that the budgie has PTSD to be reconsidered by researchers and represented at PI.

I note that the methods section does not accord with COREQ guidelines as yet, ie does not include reflexive details about the interviewers/researchers doing the analysis, the researchers' lens, or their relationship to interviewees.

The method could at least include a reflexive statement about the clinical frame of researchers and some of the concepts.

The authors could also state their position in relation to the contested view in sociology of health that mental illness is/is not equivalent to physical illness.

Given the analysis shows a strong sense of personal agency in the network relationships with pets, it would probably make sense to refer in the title to this relational work as "Self-management" rather than "management" of mental illness.

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.

Unable to assess

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

Yes

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
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