Author’s response to reviews

Title: Motivations and experiences of volunteers and patients in mental health befriending: A thematic analysis

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Author’s response to reviews:

Dear Editor,

Many thanks for your response to the submission of our paper and the comments of the reviewers! We have revised the paper in the light of the comments and believe that as a result of the revision the quality of the paper has improved.

Firstly may we apologise for the delayed submission of this revision. This was due to our lead author unexpectedly moving post. In light of a change in staffing on the project and those contributing to the original and revised manuscript, we wish to change the corresponding author and add a new co-author, who has contributed to the revised manuscript (these changes are reflected in the attached manuscript).

Our detailed response to the points of the reviewers is as follows. We left the comments of the reviewers in the original and added our responses in italics.
Reviewer reports:

Janhavi Vaingankar (Reviewer 1): In the Introduction, it may be useful to add some brief information on the befriender schemes. Volunteers belonged to 12 different schemes and it was not very clear to me how the schemes aligned or differed from each other. Were they largely similar and hence, comparable in terms of the experiences of the volunteers and clients? If not, the impact of this on the inferences drawn from the study should be discussed in the manuscript.

Thank you for this observation. In the final paragraph of the introduction (Page 4, lines 84-87), a brief summary of the schemes’ similarities has been included. As you will see, the schemes were largely similar in terms of their characteristics.

Methods

1. To include interrater reliability / kappa statistics

Although we are aware this may be helpful, unfortunately we do not have access to this information.

2. Was any other sociodemographic or background information collected besides what is provided in the Table 2? Information on volunteers' educational background / qualification, befriender's duration of illness, duration of befriender-befriendee relationship are important aspects which do not seem to come up during the thematic analysis. I find this surprising unless it was not of interest for this study.

Thank you for your comment. You are correct that some information was collected regarding the educational background/qualification of volunteers and the duration of illness in befrienders, however including this information was considered to be beyond the scope of our research question regarding the motivations and experiences of volunteers and befriendees. Therefore it was not included in this case. The duration of the relationship was not collected, again due to the scope of the project, however we believe this is information that could be collected in future studies around this topic.

Results

3. Two important aspects seem to have been left out - befriender's motivations and expectations of this relationship. I note from the section on data collection that befriendees were also asked about their motivations. However results around these are not evident to me in the manuscript. These are probably under the second theme on 'Impact'; however, I feel
there is a difference between 'impact after signing up' versus 'motivation/expectations before enlisting'.

Thank you for pointing this out. Whilst we aimed to extract data on the motivation of befriendedees, no relevant data came out as a result of the interviews, hence why they are not represented within the resulting themes.

4. Is the participant numbering provided with the verbatims. Current identity numbers eg, Volunteer 111, Befriendee 1022, are beyond the total number of participants of this study. How were these derived? Please pardon this question if these are just random numbers; however I feel if these IDs were provided by the referral source or have a potential to identify the participant in any way, these should not be presented in the manuscript. For example, the subthemes on making amends or previous mental health experience may be sensitive if it identifies the volunteers. Instead a new set of numbers should be listed. In relation to that, authors should add at least the age and gender to the verbatim statements. Eg, Volunteer XX, M, 24 years.

Thank you for your comment. We have looked into this and these ID numbers were assigned based on the scheme located from. Therefore new identity numbers have now been assigned at random, and changed within the text. The age and gender of the volunteer/recipient has also been added to the verbatim statements as suggested (where known).

Discussion

5. Authors should discuss and suggest future research ideas to address some of the study limitations and advance this work.

Thank you for this suggestion, a section has been added to the discussion (Page 17, lines 438-440) outlining potential areas of future research.

6. Lastly, a key concern regarding this work is the largely positive feedback received which has already been explained by the authors. It will be good to add some info on steps that were taken either before approaching the participants or during data collection to allay biased referrals or responses.

Thank you for this good point. A short section has been added to the discussion (page 17, lines 434-436) outlining that the interview schedule aimed to elicit negative responses as well as positive ones.
Reviewer 2:

1. Authors have conceptualised the findings well and summarised the necessary details. As they identified that befriending is often necessitated by an organisation (i.e. the third party) it would have been interesting to include information from the volunteer managers/coordinators as to how they establish the boundaries and resolve conflicts (if there is any). If there is this additional information about how the third party participates in the befriending process this would be quite valuable for future adoption and practice of befriending schemes.

Thank you for your valuable comments. Whilst we agree that this would be interesting information given fact befriending is often necessitated by third parties, we do not have any data supporting how these boundaries are established or how conflicts are resolved.

2. I would also have liked to see how the roles change in specific conditions; the authors identified that close to 70% of the sample had a mood disorder (most likely depression/anxiety) and that the age range was 22-94. It would be very informative if the age/primary diagnosis was matched to the information obtained in the interviews (e.g. perhaps by a word cloud or synthesized narrative). It would be valuable for certain organisations e.g., those offering befriending to older adults (aged 60+ with depression) to see what kind of activities that could benefit them as well as the type of relationship that evolves (e.g., friendship or more professional?)

Whilst we agree that this would be beneficial to organisations to learn what kind of activities may benefit their clients, we believe that this would be a separate research question, and therefore beyond the scope of this project.

3. I would recommend also including details in the Tables of the participants demographics per the befriending scheme as this would inform the findings further. A discussion perhaps even on the geographical differences in the befriending relationship (if any) would be interesting as I suspect befriending schemes in London will be rather different to ones in the Greater Manchester.

Unfortunately we do not have any data on whether there are any geographical differences in the befriending relationship, and as such this point has been added to the discussion (page 17, lines 438-440) as an area of interest for future research to consider.
4. In addition, I would have liked to see the perspective of the volunteer coordinator and how they have played a role in the overall befriending scheme.

We agree that this would be an interesting perspective, and whilst we do not have any information from this viewpoint, this could perhaps be an interesting direction for the future.

5. Methodology in abstract should include the type of analysis they used to obtain the results.

Thank you for your comment. A short segment has been added to Page 2, line 30, highlighting our analysis method.

Technical comments:

Title Page

1. Please include the email addresses for all authors on the title page. The corresponding author should still be indicated. Please also ensure that these email addresses match the email addresses provided in the editorial manager system.

Thank you for this comment. The email addresses for all authors have been added to the title page as requested, and match those in the editorial manager system.

2. Please remove the ‘Declaration of Interest’ after the Corresponding author information.

This declaration has now been removed as requested.

We hope that the substantially revised version of our manuscript may be acceptable for publication in BMC Psychiatry.

Yours sincerely

Stefan Priebe