Reviewer’s report

Title: The Emergence of Ethical Issues in the Provision of Online Sexual Health Outreach for Gay, Bisexual, Two-Spirit and Other Men who have Sex with Men: Perspectives of Online Outreach Workers

Version: 0 Date: 23 May 2017

Reviewer: Wendy Rogers

Reviewer's report:

This well-written paper investigates an important issue - the ethical issues encountered by outreach workers providing sexual health outreach to GB2M communities.

However, there are a number of weaknesses as the paper is currently drafted.

1. Unclear aims

The aims of the study are not clear, and this leads to confusion about the nature of the results. Line 40 on p4 states "The purpose of this study was to address ethical considerations among providers in the use of synchronous online sexual health outreach among GB2M." This is unclear - is the aim to identify the ethical issues that outreach workers encounter (if so, how and by whom are they defined as 'ethical issues'?), or to document the issues that outreach workers identify as ethical, or something else? (eg page 7, line25 - the study is described as examining the "ethical implications" of delivering online sexual health outreach services for GB2M).

From the Objectives, it seems that the project has a descriptive element, but that the authors already had strong ideas about the importance of boundaries, self-disclosure, confidentiality and security (which are listed under Objective 2). If these four issues were pre-identified as topics for investigation, then their origins and the rationale for focusing on them need to be explained. On the other hand, if these four issues are results emerging from the analysis, as reported later in the paper, how can they be listed in the Objectives as these should have been developed prior to conducting the research?

Can the authors please clarify which issues were explored using predetermined questions (and the source of these); and which truly emerged as novel findings from the research. This point is critical to the methodology of the study.

2. Thematic analysis
How and why did these four themes emerge, and what makes them distinct from each other? Prima facie, disclosing personal or identifying information seems to be a part of the broader issue of managing personal and professional boundaries with clients. Likewise, data security is an element of maintaining client confidentiality.

3. Ethical analysis

The ethical analysis is not well developed. For example, regarding theme 2, what specific ethical issues arise from decisions about disclosure of personal information? How do these differ from the ethical issues associated with managing boundaries? At the moment the four themes are presented as "ethical issues". But the reader needs to know whether this classification reflects the authors' assumptions about what ethical issues are, or whether it reflects the participants' assumptions. More analysis is needed. If these are issues that the outreach workers themselves have identified, the authors should provide some critical commentary on these. For example, how do these compare with ethical issues known to affect health care professionals in similar settings? Are there any existing frameworks of ethical expectations or norms that ought to govern outreach workers in this setting? Do the participants' intuitions about which issues are ethical issues align with accepted ethical frameworks? If not, what are the differences and how should we think about them?

I think the issues raised here are interesting, and there seems to be a place in the literature for a discussion of how to support outreach workers in managing them, but at the moment, the paper is not delivering on its potential promise.

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.

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

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