Author's response to reviews

Title: 'Relief of oppression': An organizing principle for researchers' obligations to participants in observational studies in the developing world

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Response to Reviewer’s report of Version 2 of our manuscript: ‘Relief of oppression’: An organizing principle for researchers’ obligations to participants in observational studies in the developing world.

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Reviewer’s Report (May 23, 2010)

The authors have addressed some comments in their revision but have skirted the main comment of some providing some [sic] discussion on how their suggested approach could apply to other settings/subject areas. To illustrate, what are the implications of these concepts for surveillance sites in Asia and Africa.

Authors’ Response

Our paper represents an attempt to introduce a new principle into a deeply entrenched ethical debate. We have used the concept of harm reduction to help to illustrate how we anticipate ‘relief of oppression’ could be introduced and tested in observational research settings where deep problems of social injustice persist.

The reviewer’s comment focuses on “the implications of these concepts” for specific sites of application. Of course, we are mindful that the next step for validating any conceptual innovation is to apply the concept and evaluate it in practice. But we believe the reviewer’s question is essentially an empirical one and a detailed response is simply beyond the scope of the current paper.

However, in response to the reviewer’s comment, we have further emphasized how ‘relief of oppression’ has been informed by the model of harm reduction. In particular, we have drawn on an editorial in the American Journal of Public Health in 1995 that emphasizes the critical importance of empirical evidence of the impact of harm reduction policies in the overall evaluation of harm reduction as a public health practice (see revised text, below). Importantly, although it frames some of the major public health challenges of the time, the editorial does not argue for any specific policy or approach to the application of the principle of harm reduction, but rather appears to recognize the enormous scope for creative interpretation of the principle.

We believe this framing provides the correct response to the reviewer’s comment. It is the investigators and their host communities who must navigate the specific features of the research context and the depth of their relationships to arrive at creative approaches that might satisfy the features of relief of oppression that we have described in our paper. It is then critically important that these approaches be examined, through appropriate empirical research methods (we propose that case study methods might be particularly relevant), so that the implications of these approaches can be better understood. We believe that it is through this process that
answers to the reviewer’s question about the implications of relief of oppression for various research contexts will become clear.

The revised text occurs beginning in the final sentence of p. 16 to the first paragraph of p. 17. (new text is in blue)

In this vein, we think that further clarification of the operations of relief of oppression will need to come from experience with its application, in precisely the same way that the concept of ‘harm reduction’ has been brought to life through years of practical experience. For example, rather than advocating detailed policies or strategies of application, a 1995 editorial in the American Journal of Public Health argued that “failure to use research findings” to evaluate the impact of harm reduction strategies to reduce the negative impact of illicit drug use “would violate the core value of a realistic pragmatism”, and that “(t)he value of harm reduction policies should be assessed against their actual effects on drug-related harms rather than on their consistency with cultural traditions.” [Ref] In the case of relief of oppression, we expect that it would be virtually impossible, in advance, to anticipate how the principle might be applied in any specific context, for example in routine observational studies to track the evolving epidemiology of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, but we believe that the discipline of scientific reporting on these experiences could move this important dimension of research ethics beyond philosophic debate alone. For example, case studies in various observational research contexts would help to reveal creative interpretations of ‘relief of oppression’ and identify good practices and concrete strategies, tailored to specific contexts. Collectively, over time, the resulting insights would reveal trends in practice and outcomes and thereby provide researchers and communities with potential pathways for action.