Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Zulfiqar A Bhutta

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This is an important subject area on which there is little guidance in existing literature and guidelines. While the particular case relates to sex workers and sex trade, the corollaries extend to a range of conditions of poverty that increase exposure to adverse risk factors. Should researchers investigating childhood malnutrition and interventions also have an obligation to alleviate poverty, workers on diarrheal disorders only legitimately able to work in trials if they also assisted in addressing poor environmental conditions, water supply and sanitation? The list is endless.

The authors do not clearly differentiate between “oppression” and other forms of inequity but provide a sense of the time linearity in terms of short term studies and long term observational studies. The authors propose that “that the main value of relief of oppression might lie in focusing researchers’ consideration of benefits on those that have some relevance to background conditions of injustice”.

My major problem with the manuscript is that apart from offering a broad philosophical guidance as to responsibilities of researchers, it does not offer concrete advice as to what and how should researchers do in order to affect change from “oppression” or societal injustice. At a broader level the issue is one of addressing social determinants and the authors do not help us get a sense of what the boundaries of responsibility or discourse is. It would have helped to use the entire spectrum of observational studies from the horrors of Tuskegee to the debates around placebo use in HIV treatment trials to provide guidance. I appreciate the proposal that the authors are putting forward, but there is little discussion on how the “transaction” in providing short-term benefits to participants fulfils the requirements for relief of oppression. Could this be misconstrued as undue incentives by some? Given the particular issue in question around the Majengo study, what should have been done in ideal or pragmatic circumstances? How does providing compensation or benefits to the sex workers in question mitigate the responsibility for addressing the fundamental issues that led to their participation in this work? The manuscript could be much improved by a discussion of specifics.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare I have no competing interests