Reviewer’s report

Title: Familiar ethical issues amplified: How members of research ethics committees describe ethical distinctions between disaster and non-disaster research

Version: 0 Date: 04 Mar 2017

Reviewer: Signe Mezinska

Reviewer’s report:

The manuscript reports on interesting research having potentially significant implications. As the authors indicate, the conduct of research in disaster settings is challenging in many ways and an adequate research ethics oversight is very important in these situations. The findings of the research study contribute new knowledge and provide an excellent and rather thorough review on social value of research, vulnerability, security, confidentiality and community engagement from the perspective of REC members. In general I found this manuscript to be well-written, informative and analytic.

Below are some suggestions for improvement of the manuscript:

1) There are a few abbreviation inconsistencies noted in the attached file.
2) There are several mistakes in the references (most likely a technical error): (a) Reference #2 Koeppen et al. is clearly a mistake. The listed bibliographic source has no connection with the content of the paper; (b) Reference #12 is clearly a mistake, too. In the text (p.6), there is a reference to the paper by Curry et al., but the listed bibliographic source is a paper by Dall et al. on a completely different topic; (c) Reference #13 seems to be erroneous, too.
3) In the Authors' contributions part, it is not clear what is meant by 'experiments'. The term 'experiment' seems not to be applicable in the context of qualitative, interview-based research.
4) The authors mention in the text (p. 7, line 46) that the interviewees had experience with 13 RECs, however the Table 1 mentions 15 RECs (1 ad hoc committee, 6 university RECs, 1 for-profit REC and 7 other RECs). It would be helpful to explain this difference in the numbers.
5) The authors have stated that "Each interviewee read, signed and was given a copy of the informed consent form" (p. 9, line 13). At the same time, in the data collection description it is stated that "interviews were done by phone or using voice-over-IP technology, although when possible they were conducted in person" (p. 8, line 23-24). It would be necessary to explain how the informed consent was obtained in cases when interviews were done by phone or using IP technology.
6) It is not clear what is meant by "experiences of reviewing disaster ethics review" (p. 6, line 49-50).
7) In the Data collection part, it would be useful to include additional information on interviewing process. Who did the interviews? How long were the interviews? How many of the interviews were conducted respectively by phone, using IP technology and in person?

8) The description of data analysis would benefit from adding some details, e.g. it is not mentioned who did the initial coding (p. 8, lines 46-47). Was the initial coding done by more than one researcher? Who performed the initial grouping into categories (p. 8, line 49)?

9) In the Results part the authors mention interviewees reflections on advantages and disadvantages of written vs. verbal consent to participation in research (p. 12, lines 39-52). However, this issue is not further analyzed in the discussion part. In my view, it would be useful to include a short analysis of this issue in the discussion, as well as references to the theoretical and empirical literature on the topic. Are there specific criteria for choosing written vs. verbal consent to research in disaster settings which might be considered and applied by RECs?

10) In the Conclusions part, I wasn't sure about the statement that RECs members "might also benefit from exploring resources from the field of humanitarian health ethics, such as the repository available at https://humanitarianhealthethics.net/" (p. 20, lines 30-33) Is this conclusion based on a finding of the study? If so, I am not sure if it was demonstrated in the Results part?

In general, the paper is an excellent review of key ethical concerns associated with disaster research. The article is an important contribution to discussions on ethical review of research in disaster settings. I eagerly recommend it for the publication in BMC Medical Ethics.

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.

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