Reviewer's report

Title: A reflection of ethical and methodological challenges of using separate interviews with adolescent-older carer dyads in rural South Africa

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Reviewer: Maureen Kelley

Reviewer's report:

Review comments BMC

"Are you going to tell my grandmother that I am pregnant?": Ethical and methodological challenges of research with adolescents and their older carers in rural South Africa"

Thank you for asking me to review this paper. This is a valuable and very interesting ethnographic, research ethics study on an area of growing interest in dyadic health research across generations. As the value of such research is increasingly recognized for addressing health needs for children, adolescents, and older adults the authors rightly argue as a starting point that one cannot accurately investigate health and social needs in isolation of the social context of these intergenerational caring relationships, nor should these important relationships be ignored. However, studying individuals within and across relationships poses a number of ethical and methodological challenges for research design, practice and oversight. While there has been some work to identify these challenges, this study offers greater depth to our understanding of the specific challenges raised when studying child-grandparent dyads, a caring relationship of increasing significance in LMICs with high rates of "skip-generation" households. It also suggests ways of responding to these challenges, but this aspect is understated and could be strengthened.

Some light editing is needed to catch a few missing prepositions and other grammatical typos here and there, but otherwise it is clearly and nicely written. I enjoyed reading the paper.

Specific comments:

It is always a little tricky to present research ethics data as a secondary analysis of a primary clinical or social science study without risking some confusion in the reader by conflating the
rationale, methods and findings of the primary outcomes under study with those of the research ethics/challenges analysis. This paper navigates this balance fairly well but could use more explicit sign-posting in the background and methods sections to more clearly distinguish the primary study design from the research ethics/methodological challenges analysis.

For example, I take it that relational agency as a theoretical framework informed the primary study but did it also inform the research ethics analysis at all? If so, how? (For example, potentially it helps illuminate the tensions in traditional approaches to consent and confidentiality. Is it also doing work to inform the view that we not see these challenges as limitations to dyadic research but rather inherent features in complex relationships?) I would include more in the methods-analysis section to explain the analytic approach for the secondary analysis.

A significant strength of this paper is that it includes both challenges and ideas for potential solutions. The results section includes descriptions of what was done to respond to the challenges, and these strategies are considered in the discussion section. I would encourage the authors to frame this paper at the outset as doing both. Places to frame as including both challenges and solutions: title, abstract, last para of background (line 129), introduction to results section.

Background section, line 102: Perhaps better to only list the specific issues in the research ethics literature that are relevant to understanding the issues arising with dyad studies involving children/young people and carers. This establishes a more precise starting point in the literature for the research ethics issues being raised here. Starting with the range of ethical issues discussed in LMIC research ethics literature is very broad indeed - e.g., I don't see how the capacity of ethics committees is relevant to the findings of this study and is never mentioned subsequently in the paper. Whereas the literature on navigating confidentiality in household research and HIV-testing research with couples, is directly relevant.

Methods section, lines 142-43: To clarify, consider revising slightly to say that "the concept of relational agency informed the research question, methods and interpretation of findings." (But see comment above - would help to include a more explicit account of how that theoretical approach informed the methods in this secondary analysis.)
Results section: The current organisation of the results section mixes methodological and ethical challenges, moving back and forth between these, which can be confusing. I would consider grouping by methodological and ethical issues separately as a clearer way to inform future study design and ethical planning. (As you do in part of the discussion section: "This study discussed four confidentiality challenges emerging in separate dyadic interviews with adolescents and their older carers…"). Alternatively, keep the current structure but indicate more clearly whether each is a methodological vs. ethical challenge (or mixed).

Results, line 219: It would be helpful to include one or two sentences to set up the results section with an overview of findings and how these are organized.

Results, line 244: Is the problem of sampling bias described here due to the dyadic nature of participant recruitment (and thus likely to be a challenge in any dyadic recruitment strategy) or was the problem of selection bias due to limitations of the DREAMS adolescent database, or some other factor in the DREAMS recruitment strategy not unique to dyadic studies? This strikes me as something to list in the limitations section of the primary study, but not obviously a methods challenge to report in this secondary reporting of challenges in dyadic studies.

Results, line 259: The authors begin: "Another dilemma emerging in the recruitment of dyads was a risk of coercion to participate." Since this is the first ethical issue mentioned in results (the prior section described a methodological issue) I would say, "An ethical challenge that emerged from recruitment of dyads, was…"

Results, line 275: How are the challenges of contacting adolescents in the dyad a special challenge for dyadic studies? Isn't this just a general challenge in recruiting mobile, busy participants, especially adolescents? Rather than a challenge, dyadic studies with grandparents may offer the advantage of having an "anchor participant", the grandparent, who can help you track down their grandchild. Isn't the issue, rather, of getting both of the participants in the dyad in the same place for the joint interviews?

Results, line 462: Do you mean unintended preferential treatment of participants by the researcher? If so, I would suggest revising this header to say more clearly what this section captures.
Discussion, line 490 and following: "In our study, we approached older carers first to align with socially accepted practices." Referring back to your last results sub-section, do you think approaching grandparents first and spending more time at the home waiting for the adolescents contributed to the last challenge mentioned, preferential bonding with the grandparents? Is that the challenge you have in mind here in referencing the Ugandan studies? It might help to clarify which specific challenges the Ugandan model is meant to address.

Discussion, line 516 and following: "As mentioned, the relational agency explains how adolescents' experiences are shaped by their relationships and how their behaviours are influenced by the relational agency." Considering the framework of relational agency, there is no mention of other relationships outside of the dyad under study - the grandchild/grandparent. In the team's experience, were there possible blind spots regarding other important relationships in either the adolescents' or grandparents' lives, such as peers, friends, other family, whose influence was important to understanding the full picture of health and social issues under study, but which are excluded when limiting to study of the dyad, as opposed to family, household or community? The dyad is still only capturing two points of connection in a complex relational web, all impacting relational agency, social well being and health.

**Are the methods appropriate and well described?**
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

**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.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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