Key Issues of Research Ethics and Integrity in Global Challenges Research: A Scoping Review Protocol

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ABSTRACT

Global challenges research brings with it the challenge of integrating diverse cultural and disciplinary perspectives in the service of addressing persistent and complex problems. In fragile and resource poor contexts this also brings with it a swathe of operational, legal and logistic challenges which can generate ethical conflicts. A scoping review is needed to identify key issues of research ethics and integrity, as well as strategies that have been brought to bear in an effort to resolve them. This protocol followed Prisma guidelines for Scoping Reviews (Prisma-ScR) and provides details of the review scope and parameters.

Keywords: Ethics, Integrity, Global Research, LMIC, Scoping Review

1. Background

Global challenges research (GCR) is defined by seemingly intractable and complex problems, often in resource-poor countries, that require large-scale, interdisciplinary, international collaborations of increasing complexity (Holm et al., 2013). In this context, partnership projects involving researchers from higher incomes countries (HIC) and lower-middle incomes countries (LMIC) are the norm (Dean, Njelesani, Smith, & Bates, 2015). These partnerships pose unique challenges in identifying and resolving issues of research ethics and integrity (Crump et al., 2010).

GCR projects are often undertaken in countries with emerging and/or limited research infrastructure in the context of broader resource limitations and, often, sociopolitical instability. In this context, researchers face the challenge of ensuring compliance with the basic principles of ethics in research, which are respect, beneficence and non-maleficence, and justice (UNICEF, 2015). Compliance with these principles becomes more difficult in GCR since these projects are also increasingly multi-team, cross-country, cross-cultural and cross-sector (university, third sector, civil society, government) (Holm et al., 2013), each bringing different perspectives and lived experiences when defining concepts such as respect, vulnerability and justice (World Health Organization, 2015).

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The challenge of establishing genuine, equitable global research partnerships among researchers from HIC and LMIC must also be considered. Given that funding often comes from HIC, such as the United Kingdom (UK) or European Union (Dean et al., 2015) tensions in establishing shared ethical practices can replicate international power inequalities and colonial legacies (Orr, Daoust, Dyvik, Puhan, & Boddy, 2019). Without careful attention to the demand characteristics of power differentials, important local perspectives can remain 'invisible' in the planning stages of research only to become powerfully impactful during the implementation stage.

The World Health Organization (2015) also highlights that the GCR has the challenge of considering the cultural, economic and political context in which the research is carried out. Research participants in disadvantaged societies can be exposed to risks produced by the research itself or by the context in which it is developed. In this way there is the challenge of ensuring the welfare of participants, making sure that they understand the scope, risks and potential benefits of the research. This is particularly important where language and cultural barriers make informed consent additionally difficult. UNICEF (2015) also suggests the importance of considering and validating community norms in such areas as informed consent, recruitment and criteria for determining payment and compensation to study participants.

This complex contextual landscape potentially presents a significant risk exposure for upholding high standards of integrity in research conduct and preventing intentional, or unintentional, research misconduct. Research intensive countries such as the UK are increasingly developing documents and guidelines designed to prevent ethical conflicts in research, addressing topics such as voluntariness, anonymity and confidentiality, respecting cultural sensitivities, ensuring participation from socially excluded groups, management, use of data and regulations for international collaborations as well as avoiding conflicts of interest **(**ex. Department for International Development, 2011; Economic and Social Research Council, 2015; UK Research Integrity Office, 2009).

Despite this, a UK Parliamentary Standing Committee found the current Research Concordat guidelines are not being followed by all research institutions with around 25% not even providing an annual report on research integrity (Science and Technology Committee, 2011; UK Parliament, 2018). The Committee notes that the responsibility of ensuring good practice is with funders, employers and researchers and also suggests a need for clearer and more enforceable regulations. It recommended the implementation of an external ethics review to oversee research institutions' handling of alleged misconduct.

In concert, in recent years there has been a growing expectation from funders, regulators, and the community for there to be higher standards of ethical conduct when spending public monies, particularly in vulnerable contexts where power differentials may result in disadvantage to participating individuals, communities or research partners.

A joint statement from research funders - Department for International Development (DFID), the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS), the Department of Health & Social Care (DHSC), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the global charitable foundation, Wellcome - stressed the need to build on the existing knowledge base surrounding research ethics (UKCDR). It was acknowledged that there is already a strong system in place for preventing misconduct and ensuring research integrity, yet there is room for refinement. For example, there has been a recent focus on ensuring that funders,

employers and researchers are aware of the potential for abuses of power and that comprehensive safeguarding practices are implemented.

For this reason, the current scoping review will distill ethics-related issues from the burgeoning literature involving GRC projects, so as to provide an evidence-base to inform relevant solutions and responses. This review is being undertaken as part of a broader project being conducted at the University of Edinburgh: "Leadership in Ethics, Integrity and Research Conduct in Complex LMIC-UK partnership projects" (Reid, et al, 2019). The project aims to identify the challenges and ethical dilemmas in Complex LMIC-UK partnership research projects as well as investigating conditions that can best support ethical practice.

A scoping review is essential to establish the extent and variety of existing literature in this area (Tricco et al., 2018). Synthesising themes, main findings and gaps is key to providing guidance for researchers and for planning future ethics-related research. This scoping review looks to identify success stories as well as establishing whether there are ethical issues that continue to be problematic in GCR contexts. It is important to acknowledge the unique challenges faced by researchers working in this context in order to effectively implement specialised solutions. Drawing together challenges and potential solutions from the global academic village is an important part of working toward a shared platform for designing a preventative response.

The following sections describe the characteristics of the proposed review. This protocol was written following the guidance of PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco et al., 2018).

2. Methods

2.1 Title

Key Issues of Research Ethics and Integrity in Global Challenges Research in Complex and Fragile Contexts: A Scoping Review of the Literature.

2.2 Start date

17-06-2019

2.3 Anticipated completion date

30-09-2019

2.4 Stage of review at time of this submission:

	Started	Completed
Preliminary searches	Yes	Yes
Piloting of the study selection process	Yes	Yes
Formal screening of search results against eligibility criteria	Yes	No

Data extraction	No	No
Data analysis	No	No

2.5 Funding sources/sponsors

SFC ODA Global Challenges – GCRF University of Edinburgh Internal Funding Scheme (College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences)

2.6 Objective and review questions

The aim of this review is identifying current and emerging ethical challenges in GCR context as well as possible solutions. To this end, the review will focus on publications made in the context of research in Least Developed (LD) and LMIC countries according to the World Bank (2018) or Development Assistance Committee (DAC)(2018) classification or in the context of countries in sociopolitical conflict or war.

In order to achieve this aim, two review questions were formulated: 1. What are the key issues of research ethics and integrity in GCR that have arisen in the last 10 years? 2. What are the policies and practices that can help solve the ethical challenges in GCR?

2.7 Literature Search

Key searches will be made across multiple academic databases that reflect the multidisciplinary nature of the phenomenon: Scopus, Web of Science, MEDLINE, EMBASE, psycINFO, CAB Abstracts, Global Health, Philosopher's Index, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. Studies published in any language between 2009 and 2019 will be included in this review.

The following search terms, in the document´s title, will be used: ((research AND ethic* OR integrity) AND (income OR "development countr*" OR lmic* OR lamic* OR afric* OR "east asia" OR "central America" OR vulnerab* OR fragi* OR confl* OR war OR inestab* OR "cross cultural" OR interdisciplinary OR cultur* OR Afghanistan OR "Guinea-Bissau" OR "Sierra Leone" OR Benin OR Haiti OR Somalia OR "Burkina Faso" OR Korea OR Sudan OR Burundi OR Liberia OR Syria* OR "Central African Republic" OR Madagascar OR Chad OR Malawi OR Tanzania OR Congo OR Mali OR Togo OR Eritrea OR Mozambique OR Uganda OR Ethiopia OR Nepal OR Yemen OR Gambia OR Niger OR Guinea OR Rwanda OR Angola OR Indonesia OR Philippines OR Bangladesh OR Kenya OR "São Tomé and Principe" OR Bhutan OR Kiribati OR Senegal OR Bolivia OR Kyrgyz OR "Solomon Islands" OR "Cabo Verde" OR Lao OR "South Sudan" OR Cambodia OR Lesotho OR Swaziland OR Cameroon OR Mauritania OR "Timor-Leste" OR Comoros OR Micronesia OR Tunisia OR Moldova OR Ukraine OR "Côte d'Ivoire" OR Mongolia OR Uzbekistan OR Djibouti OR Morocco OR Vanuatu OR Egypt OR Myanmar OR Jordan OR Kosovo OR Viet* OR "El Salvador" OR Nicaragua OR "West Bank" OR Gaza OR Ghana OR Nigeria OR Zambia OR Honduras OR Pakistan OR Zimbabwe OR India OR "Papua New Guinea" OR Tuvalu OR Armenia OR Eswatini OR Georgia OR Guatemala OR Kyrgyzstan OR "Sri Lanka" OR Tajikistan OR Tokelau)).

2.8 Types of study to be included

Inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed empirical studies using a qualitative, quantitative or mixed approach. Literature reviews and case studies (or small N designs) published in peer-reviewed journals, and dissertations will also be included. Papers from any language, published from 2009 to 2019, will be included.

Exclusion criteria: grey literature without peer revision, professional opinions (letters, notes, essays), editorial publications and books or book chapters. Papers that do not have a focus on research ethics or do not centre on participants from LMIC and/or vulnerable contexts will not be included. If the research does not include human participants it will be excluded, as will papers published prior to 2009.

2.9 Participants/population

This search will include articles referring to research with human participants from or residing in global research contexts, LMIC, vulnerable contexts, zones of conflict, or who are part of cultural minorities.

2.10 Context

Studies conducted in any setting, formats or context will be included (e.g., studies in LMIC countries, in the context of migration, in refugee camps, carried out with a clinical or community sample, in situ or online).

2.11 Outcomes of interest

The selected papers will be analyzed in search of the following information: Type of study, countries/continents of the authors of the study, subject area/disciplines of the authors of the study, countries/continents in which the study is carried out (or where its participants come from), sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants, key issues of research ethics and integrity, ethical policies and practices that can help solve the ethical challenges in GCR.

2.12 Data collection

Studies yielded in the search will be imported into EndNote where duplicates will be identified and removed. Two researchers will review the titles and remove any irrelevant studies. When unsure of the relevance of a study, the researchers will screen the abstract. Inter-observer reliability will be evaluated using Cohen's Kappa index. The differences will be resolved by agreement. A third researcher will be consulted in case of any unresolved issues.

Then, the full texts of the remaining studies will be assessed independently by two reviewers considering the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The discrepancies will be resolved in the same way as in the previous step. Finally, the selected papers will be reviewed for the extraction of the data.

2.13 Data synthesis

A narrative will be made with a summary of the elements of interest of each paper. Papers will be grouped if common themes are identified following the suggestions of Braun and Clarke (2006). Finally, a summary table will be prepared showing the results of interest.

3. Discussion

Global research involving LMIC partnerships with HIC is increasingly common and is perhaps necessary to solve complex and intractable problems of social impact (Dean et al, 2015). Collaboration between researchers from different countries, different disciplines and with different experiences can benefit the design of quality research and contribute creative and effective solutions to problems that affect large populations (Holm et al., 2013). However, this type of research involves the challenge of establishing mutually agreed ethical standards and good practice in a context of high complexity (Crump et al., 2010).

While ethical dilemmas are not unique to GCR, thought is required on how best to deal with the uniquely complex nature of this research landscape. Global partnerships can present difficulties when the ethical ideals of one partner are different from another (World Health Organization, 2015). Being aware of these differences in research practice can highlight where potential concerns may arise and indicates where further development of national and international ethical guidelines is needed to incorporate GCR contexts.

While the usefulness of guidelines to prevent ethical conflicts is recognized, according to World Health Organization (2015) the GCR ethical dilemmas cannot be solved solely by following guidelines. Resolution requires the development of ethical integrity on the part of researchers and research organisations and a shared platform for understanding what the issues are and how they may be translated or interpreted within a cultural relativist framework. For this reason it is necessary to generate tools to guide the reflection of researchers in the search for appropriate solutions to the challenges involved in the GCR. To this end, the aim of this review is draw together and systematize the available literature on ethical challenges and their possible solutions in GCR.

This protocol describes the steps that will be followed in a scoping review aimed at identifying key ethical challenges and potential solutions. A series of databases have been included in order to access papers of different disciplines. At the same time, the search words have been specifically chosen in order to cover research ethics in the context of high complexity, in collaborative cross-cultural research with LMIC.

Due to the amplitude of the study phenomenon it is possible to advance two limitations of the review. First, given the high number of papers that include the word "ethics" in their abstract (because they have passed through the approval of an ethics committee), we have chosen to search for the words selected in the title. Second, due to limited resources, papers in languages other than English may only be reviewed by one researcher who is familiar with that language.

In spite of these limitations, it is expected that the results of this search will provide a rich starting point for cataloguing and understanding current and emerging ethical conflicts faced by international partnership projects, and of some possible ways to address them. This information is gathered to encourage the reflection of researchers conducting cross-

cultural research in order to maintain high ethical standards and to develop a shared foundation for best practice.

Declarations

Conflict Of Interest: Authors have no known conflicts of interest to declare.

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