



ETHICS IN HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH: A Systematic Literature Review

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Background

- Humanitarian emergencies are defined as natural and man-made incidents, both acute and chronic, that threaten human health, safety and wellbeing.
- In the past several decades, there has been a more robust attempt to deepen knowledge of the unique and challenging ethical issues of working in and researching humanitarian emergencies.
- This project attempts to assess the quantity and quality of evidence available over the 20 years since the publication of the Sphere guidelines, and to highlight particular ethical issues present in research in humanitarian contexts.

Methods

- With adherence to PRISMA guidelines for systematic review, we searched PubMed and Scopus for all relevant articles. (Figure 1)
- Articles published after 1997 (Sphere Project initiation) to 2017 were included if they demonstrated robust discussions of (1) research (2) ethics and (3) humanitarian settings.

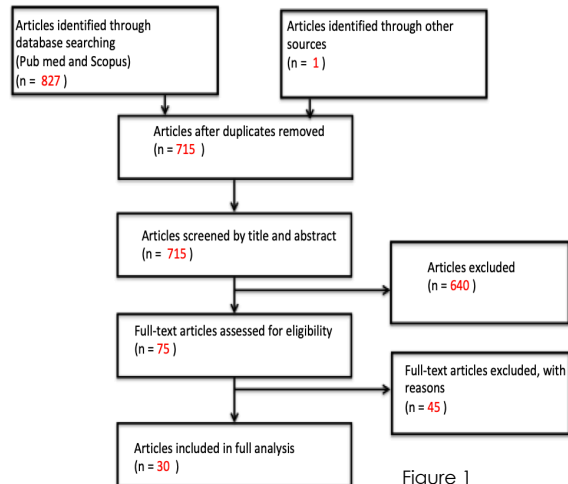
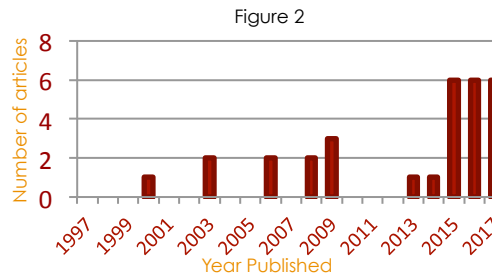


Figure 1

- Included full-text articles were read and analyzed by two independent reviewers
- We used an inductive approach to identify key concepts and coded them into related non-mutually exclusive themes. We then synthesized each theme by comparing the discussions and conclusions articles and highlighting important points and core challenges.
- Ethical points of discussion were considered 'Major Topics' if multiple articles had robust discussions of a theme

Results

- Of the 715 unique articles resulting from our search terms, 30 (4.2%) matched our inclusion criteria
- Eighteen (62.1%) were published in 2015 or later and only four were published before 2007. (Figure 2)



- Article types included: 14 (48.2%) expert statements; 9 (31.0%) case studies; 5 (17.2%) literature reviews; 5 (17.2%) original research studies; and 2 (6.9%) book chapters. (types were not mutually exclusive)
- Analysis resulted in 11 Major Themes, extrapolated based on criteria described above. (Figure 3) Themes included:
 - Cultural considerations** - balancing local customs and cultural norms with research expectations
 - Community Engagement** - ethical issues with involving local stakeholders in research development and execution
 - Ethics Review** - practical challenges with institutional ethics review in humanitarian emergencies
 - Dual Imperative**- friction between the roles of intervener and researcher

Figure 3: Major Topics	No. of Papers
Cultural Considerations	13
Community Engagement	11
Ethics Review Board	10
Dual Imperative	8
Informed Consent	6
Clinical Trials in a Humanitarian Setting	5
Child Participation	4
Data Ownership	3
Mental Health	3
Participatory Visual Methods	2
Risk to Researchers	2

Discussion

- From 1997-2017, we identified an increase in articles with robust ethical discussion, which suggests a growing interest in humanitarian research ethics.
- Through this process, several unanswered questions were identified, including:
 - How are researcher to navigate situations in which universal ethical principals are in conflict with cultural norms?
 - How are researchers to adhere to the accepted notation of including local stakeholders in research when they may lack the qualifications to do so?
 - Given inherently time sensitive nature of research in humanitarian emergencies, how can we ensure ethical review is both efficient and effective?

Conclusions

- To our knowledge, this is the first systematic review of research ethics in the humanitarian setting.
- Most of the articles were expert statements and the majority of topics focused on cultural considerations, community engagement and ethics review challenges.
- Our data also highlights a number of unanswered questions related to fundamental conflicts that are unique to conducting research in the humanitarian setting. Addressing these questions will be imperative for furthering this important area of study.