



Regular Article

Perceived suffering in humanitarian images: A photo-elicitation

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Humanitarianism
Distant suffering
Distress
Photographs
Photo-voice
Visual analysis
Thematic analysis

ABSTRACT

Background: Photographs depicting suffering in humanitarian contexts are important to communicate the extent of crises and to document atrocities. Such images of “distant suffering” may also be exploitative and dehumanize those pictured. Despite these aspects, what is perceived as “suffering” in an image remains undefined. This study uses a humanitarian lens to explore how suffering is perceived in images.

Method: Through a photo-elicitation approach, 24 images of suffering were chosen by curators from a humanitarian archive. Seventeen professionals were purposively recruited from humanitarian organizations or refugee health research. Participants submitted up to four images of suffering from the curated images or other sources, with narratives describing why they chose the image and why it conveyed suffering. Twenty-seven photo-narratives were submitted. Descriptive visual analysis of images and thematic analysis of narratives were conducted.

Results: Fourteen photographs were from the curated images and two from other sources. Images varied in hues and settings. All featured one or more persons, and many with emotional expressions. Perceived suffering was described in themes of decoded emotions and their facial or bodily expressions, a nexus of uncertainty and vulnerability, and through relatability or resonance. Descriptions included emotions like sadness and grief, lack of safety or options, and how participants perceived they would experience a situation.

Conclusions: Perceived suffering was conveyed in situations of vulnerability or uncertainty, relatability or resonance, and expressions of perceived emotions. These findings may foster understanding of forms of distant suffering in people’s lives and how this form of suffering takes expression.

1. Introduction

Photographs of humanitarian crises have long been published within popular media and used by humanitarian organizations. This practice of featuring images of suffering in print media dates at least as far back as the 1890s, in reporting on famine in India (Curtis, 2012) and atrocities in West Africa (Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2016). Such images may bring public awareness about catastrophes and armed conflicts, document massacres, or communicate the plight of those who are suffering (Curtis, 2012; Ghosh, 2019). They may also be used during fundraising campaigns of humanitarian organizations to generate financial support (Dencik & Allan, 2017). Images of suffering are effective, in fact, to use for these purposes, and are often composed or crafted in a way to elicit a specific effect (Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2016) such as to evoke emotions or discomfort for the viewer, or to prompt the viewer to make a donation

(Slovic, 2007).

But, the displaying of images of suffering, in itself, also brings about a rash of ethical criticisms. Extensive literature across media and visual studies, communications sciences and others, critique the ethics and politics of suffering imagery (Boltanski, 1999; Calain, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2006; Dencik & Allan, 2017).

This concept of “distant suffering,” (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006) or when far-away sufferers are portrayed in media, risks detriment for both the sufferer and the viewer. It may legitimize observation rather than action. A focus on observing, and making a spectacle of the “suffering other” by a non-suffering viewer can bring about a “politics of pity,” (Arendt, 1963; Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006) entrenching the power dynamic of the haves looking onto the have-nots. It can even be seen as robbing the sufferer of their voice or any meaningful recognition of their experience, and instead, paradoxically empowers the

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.102404>

Received 6 December 2025; Received in revised form 11 December 2025; Accepted 18 December 2025

Available online 6 January 2026

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viewer by turning the focus to the viewer's emotional experience and away from the sufferer.

The viewer of distant suffering can also be considered to be deprived, missing broader understanding of the context pictured and what is often complicated scenarios which bring about suffering in humanitarian images. The viewer may have only a mere glimpse of a situation of suffering, through an image crafted to bring them shock, but within acceptable norms (Dencik & Allan, 2017). Meanwhile, the viewer may then face a moral challenge, where they feel compelled to respond, but remain at a loss as to how (Chouliaraki, 2006).

In studies of humanitarian imagery, communication of suffering is viewed in light of the political, cultural, geopolitical, and media interests that shape it (Chouliaraki, 2010). The representation of suffering at a distance is inherently political; in creating or displaying the image, decisions are taken about who is depicted, how they are depicted, and what narrative is shared or omitted. These decisions may reflect media interests, for example, or the audience whose empathy is sought (Chouliaraki, 2006). Distant suffering is now increasingly mediated by digital platforms, such as websites and social media. Like traditional print media and television, these platforms are also situated within broader social and political structures that may influence how suffering is represented (Keenaghan & Reilly, 2024).

Yet, as these and other critiques amass about why images of suffering are socially and ethically problematic (Calain, 2013), a fundamental remaining question is "what is perceived suffering in an image?" In the health care sciences, which shares the same core aim as humanitarianism of relieving suffering, suffering is understood as a state of severe distress (Cassel, 1982), or an intensely negative situation (Rodgers & Cowles, 1997). Suffering is even considered by some to be universal (Kraus, 1998). At the same time, suffering is shaped by an individual's interpretation, and recognized to be a socially- and culturally-influenced subjective experience (Rodgers & Cowles, 1997).

Despite the centrality of suffering in humanitarian communications, and in health care sciences, there is a lack of clarity around how suffering is visually constructed and interpreted. Images may depict suffering through facial expressions, bodily postures, or environmental cues, but the interpretation of these signs may not be universal. A lack of a conceptual understanding of suffering in visual media, risks misrepresenting the experiences of those depicted and misunderstanding the emotional impact on viewers. It may limit our ability to critically assess ethical and emotional consequences of suffering imagery, and hinder interdisciplinary dialogue across fields like media studies, humanitarian ethics, and health care sciences. A clearer understanding of how suffering is perceived visually is essential for furthering investigation of the topic of distant suffering and suffering in humanitarianism and care. As such, this study explores how viewers perceive "suffering" in humanitarian images.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Photo-elicitation using participant-selected images

The study asked participants to identify images of suffering and to describe them. The goal was to ascertain viewers' perceptions of suffering in humanitarian images, a form of distant suffering where commentaries on the topic originate. The method used was a form of photo-elicitation where photographs or other visual information are used to elicit information from research participants (Harper, 2010). Photo-elicitation was first described in anthropological research, using photographs directly in research interviews and asking participants to talk about them (Collier Jr., 1957). The photographs or images used in photo-elicitation studies may be generated by the researcher or by participant, depending on the aim of the research. In the present study, the images included both, whereby participants chose images provided by the research team or images they created or obtained from another source.

2.2. Curated humanitarian photographs of suffering

Through a process designed for this study, a curated selection of humanitarian images of suffering was assembled (see Fig. 1). This was to provide a common reference point (Collier et al., 2009) and aiming to connect participants to the subject of the research. Two professionals with experience in humanitarian communications and news media photography, respectively, served as curators to assemble a selection of "images of suffering". Each curator was asked first to independently choose 75–100 images of suffering from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Audio-Visual Archives ("Audio-Visual Archives," 2023), an openly accessible collection of ICRC images, which contained over 110,000 images at the time of the study. In this first round of viewing, the curators chose $N_1 = 85$ and $N_2 = 88$ images. Secondly, the curators were asked to view all photographs the other had identified as

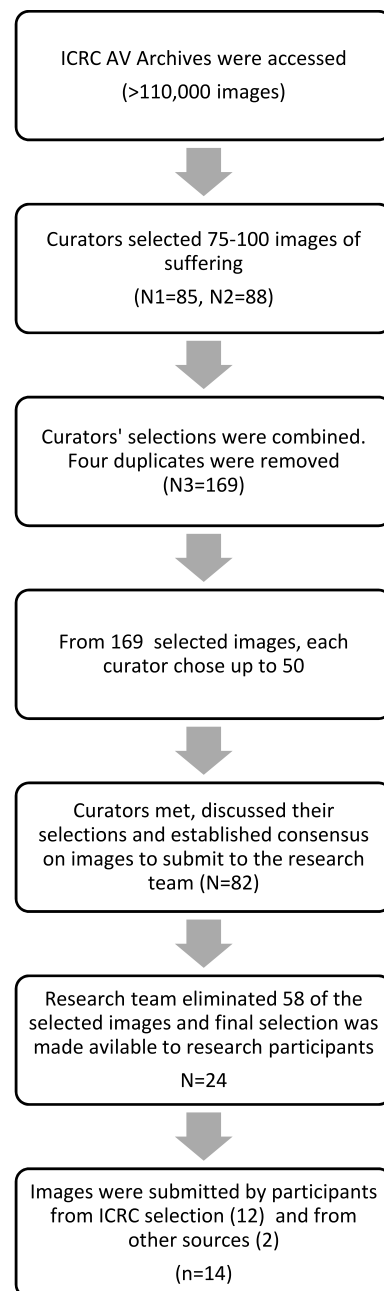


Fig. 1. Process by which the images of suffering were selected and submitted to the study.

well as their own for commonalities or differences between the images selected. Four of the images identified in this first step were duplicated across their selections, resulting in a total selection of $N = 169$ unique images of suffering from the ICRC Archive. Each curator was then asked to independently select 40–50 images of suffering from the combined images to allow a consolidation and refinement of their selections. The curators in person viewed and discussed their combined selection of images and together established consensus on a final selection of 75–100 images of suffering to submit to the research team ($N3 = 82$).

The research team then reviewed the curators' selection of photos. Each member of the research team identified up to 40 images to remove from the study to ensure research participants' exposure to images would not be unnecessarily distressful, and remove images which may violate the integrity of subjects in the images. Some images removed included photographs of unaccompanied children who may not have been able to consent, patients receiving emergency medical care who may have been under duress and unable to consent, and images of patients with burns or amputations that may have been unnecessarily gruesome or frightening for viewers. A total of 24 of the curators' selected images remained after this final step and were included in the present study.

2.3. Participants and setting

A purposive sampling of participants was identified for the present study to obtain perspectives from those whose professional role relates to humanitarianism, such as working within research or practice in migration, health, psychosocial support, or similar fields. This sample of participants was chosen to be able to ascertain perspectives from people who may have a depth of understanding of the contexts in which humanitarian organizations operate and the topics depicted in humanitarian images. The participants were identified through professional networks of the research team, academic publications, and webpages at universities and civil society organizations. The study was conducted in Sweden from October 2023 through January 2024.

2.4. Data collection procedures

Eligible participants were reached with an informational email about the study describing the aim, the informed consent process, the confidential and voluntary nature of participation, and how to take part. As viewing or describing images of suffering may be upsetting, all participants received information for accessing health care resources in case of distress. All participants completed an informed consent procedure and voluntarily took part in the study. The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2019–06412).

Participants took part in the study via email, through which they referenced or appended up to four images from the curated humanitarian images or images from another source of their choosing. This was designed to allow participants to freely submit any image they perceived to be suffering. For each image submitted, participants were asked to include a written narrative, in English or in Swedish, describing in detail: What do you see in the image you have chosen? What aspects of this image convey "suffering" for you? Why have you identified this particular image as an image of suffering?

A total of 27 photo-narratives were submitted by 17 participants, a sample size in line with previous studies (Balomenou & Garrod, 2015). Of the participants, all but six had a current academic affiliation. Most were connected to universities, but some worked at public sector entities, or non-profit organizations, within areas like psychology, public health, public mental health, humanitarian action, child protection, global health, and migrant health. Participants ranged in age from 32 to 53 years. Three participants were men who submitted a total of four photo-narratives. Three participants made submissions in Swedish, with a total of six photo-narratives among them, and the remaining submissions were in English. The narratives ranged in length from 11 to 383

words, and an average of 139 words.

2.5. Data analysis

Visual analysis: A coding scheme was developed to guide a descriptive visual analysis of the images reflecting aspects of compositional interpretation developed by Gillian Rose (Rose, 2001) and complemented by (Hook & Glaveanu, 2013) (see Fig. 2). The aim here was to document attributes of the imagery, interactive elements in the images, and with a sociocultural lens to note those that are representational or symbolic (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The images were analyzed qualitatively in an iterative process. The first author reviewed the images in multiple passes, where first, the attributes and elements of each of the images submitted were coded, these were combined to craft a description of each image, and finally an overall summary description of the visual data of all images was created (see Fig. 3).

Analysis of text: Narratives were uploaded into NVivo software and thematic analysis was conducted (Lochmiller, 2021). Textual data was reviewed with multiple readings, open-coded in an inductive manner in multiple passes (Saldana, 2013), and then clustered into patterns and categories. Summary memos were created as a tool for arranging clusters and categories and to take note of similarities and variations emerging (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Within the summary memos, the themes were developed and the supporting content was organized.

3. Findings

There were a total of 14 unique images among the 27 photo-narrative submissions. Five of the images were described in photo-narrative submissions by more than one participant. These included an image of a group of men in a clinical setting which was described in five photo-narratives. An image of a single seated man was referenced in four photo-narratives. Three other images were referenced by three participants. The remaining nine unique images submitted to the study were each described one time. Of all images submitted, only two were chosen by the participants from sources other than the curated humanitarian images. One of those participant-sourced images was in the form of a watercolor-style drawing in three colors. All other images submitted to the study were photographs. The second participant-sourced image submitted was a photograph from a major newspaper. Only one photo-narrative was of a black-and-white photograph, while all others were color photographs.

3.1. Descriptive visual analysis findings

Compositional and descriptive analyses of the images uncovered various presentations across the submitted images. Detailed descriptions may be found in the Supplement. Colors ranged from vibrant clothing and greenery, to pale fabrics, and neutral-colored interiors or exteriors of buildings, or debris. Photographs were taken outdoors or inside under artificial or mixed lighting.

Images with more than one person revealed interactions, including offerings of comfort or help, or sympathy, or gazes of concern. Expressions included concern or worry, overt sadness in the form of crying, or holding one's face in their hands. Some figures are crying out, or wailing, and others appear grief-stricken or in anguish. Images include children and adults. In one, only a tiny bit of skin is visible, while other images feature people. Symbolic elements include red crosses indicative of the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, a burial ceremony, and also medical uniforms, which imply institutions associated with care and loss. Some people are seated or slouching, suggesting exhaustion or resignation. One features a woman who appears in shock, while in another, a crowd is surrounding a hospital gurney, suggesting a collective and urgent incident. Photos are taken where subjects gaze at an angle from eye height, to a view from far below. Some photos are close-ups, while others feature a busy scene, conveying a contrast of

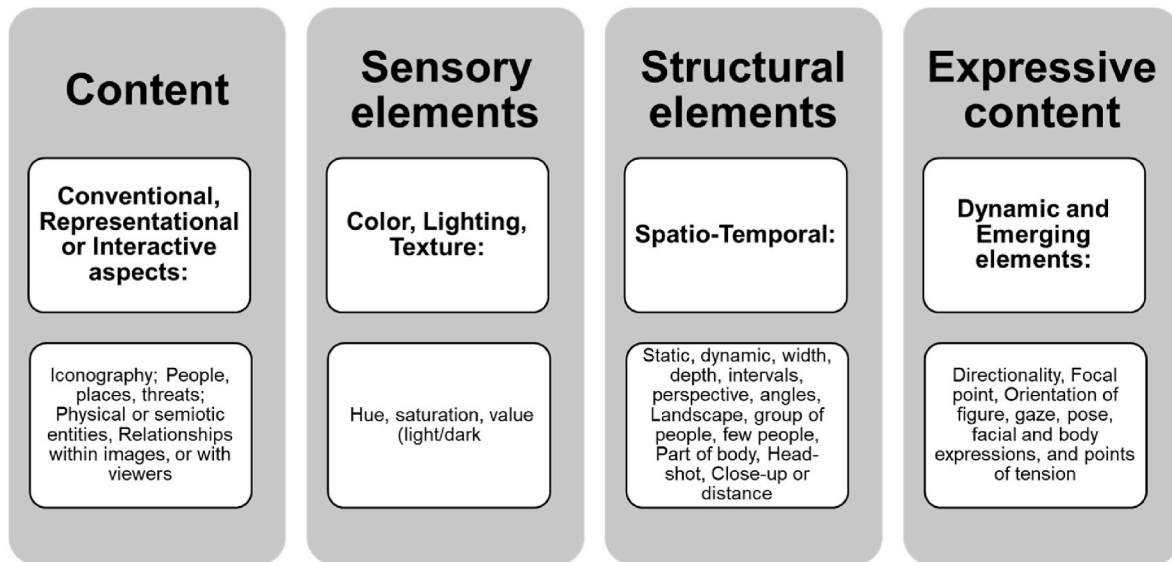


Fig. 2. Approach to descriptive visual analysis based on Compositional Interpretation (Hook & Glaveanu, 2013; Rose, 2001).

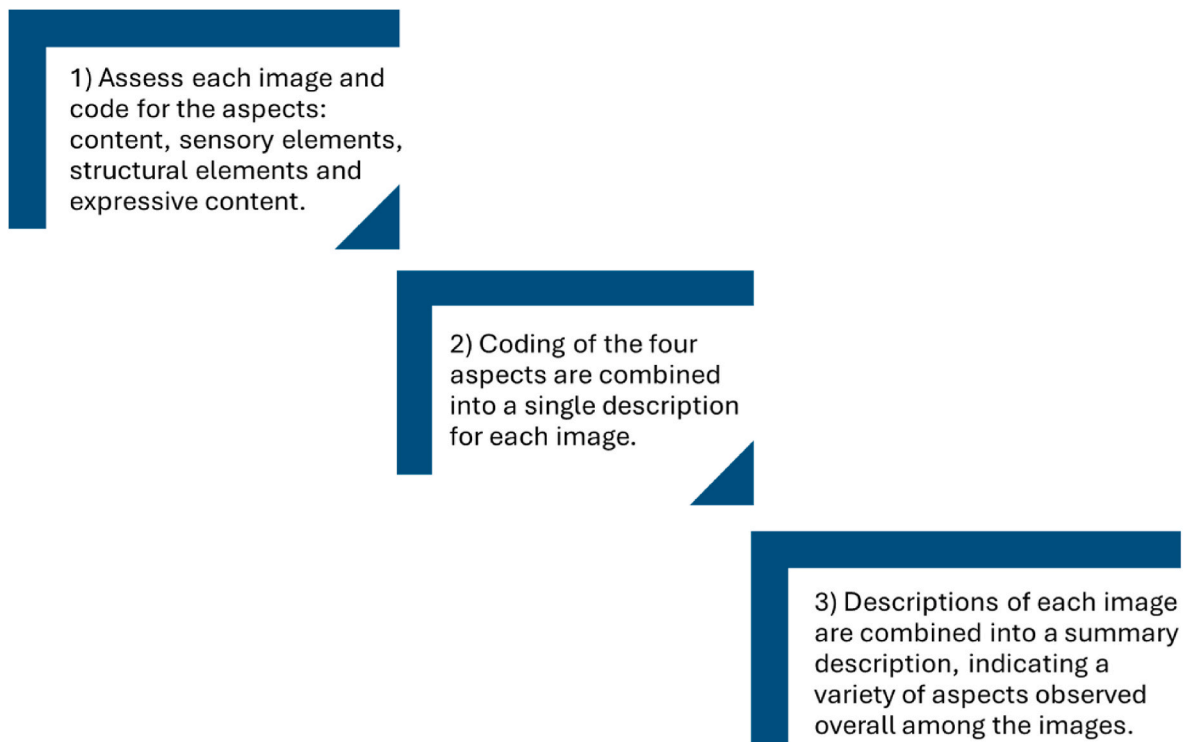


Fig. 3. Steps of carrying out the visual descriptive analysis.

perspectives of personal and communal suffering.

3.2. Narrative analysis findings

Suffering was characterized in descriptions of humanitarian imagery in themes of: decoded emotions and their facial or bodily expressions, a nexus of uncertainty and vulnerability, and as conveyed through relatability or resonance.

3.2.1. Decoded emotions and their facial or bodily expressions

Suffering was perceived by participants in “the images that show the internal emotional state”(P01) and referencing the distress or emotions

expressed which are reflecting an individual’s subjective feelings or experience. The suffering could be “unseen physical, social, or psychological suffering”(P11) or an experience of “a sudden, acute trauma.”(P08) In such explanations, the suffering was observable, but through the expressed feelings on the person, and not by observing the incident or occurrence in the environment or surroundings. “Suffering is about the internal experience of external circumstances”(P01) as respondents indicate suffering as due to a lack of ability or resources to cope, or an individual’s response to a situation, not necessarily the actual situation or circumstance itself.

Suffering was described as arising in emotions of shame, grief, pain, guilt, sadness, but particularly extreme or “unbearable”(P09) emotions.

It was recognized as emotion that shows “so much pain”(P15d) or an emotion so strong that it “comes out of the picture”(P16). Suffering was seen in an image displaying “people in uncontrolled grief”(P07b) and it is described as profound grief, or expressions of extreme displays of grief. It is not merely a death or loss described, but death of a loved one, an abrupt death, or a premature death. Suffering was not just a loss, but loss of someone close, like a close friend or close relative. For example, it “must be more than an old husband who died”(P15d). Suffering was seen as grief or anguish that is particularly profound in its presentation.

Suffering was described through perceived “loneliness”(P05a, P07, P15b) and suffering “is much worse if you are without loved ones” (P12) and do not have outside support. It was seen in the “stillness, the fact that the person is sitting alone”(P07c), or as an experience which is “isolating”(P07a) as “no one else who hasn’t experienced what they’ve been through can understand what it feels like” (P07a). Descriptions indicated that suffering is something only to be experienced by the individual and as internal emotions. This internal state of being alone, or cut off from one’s surroundings, is suffering. One who is suffering was described as having “lost so much”(p15b) or “lost contact with family and friends and is simply lost”(P05a).

It was both “facial emotions and body language”(P11) conveying suffering in the images. Participants indicated that suffering was recognized on a person’s face, and in images with clearly emotional expressions on faces. “Something in this image touched me strongly, it’s a close-up and you can see the expression on the face”(P16) was described, or that “For me, several of the images with faces touched me.”(P16) The viewer recognized emotions of “worry and anxiety”(P07d) or “fear and confusion in the face”(P08) or that someone was looking on, “worriedly”(P15a). The eyes in particular, “especially the eyes”(P16) convey a distant look, or resignation or despair, “the eyes communicate that the experience has been going on for a long time”(P07d). Tears or perceived crying indicated suffering, as well.

3.2.2. A nexus of uncertainty and vulnerability

Suffering was perceived in uncertainty, vulnerability, and lack of comfort or protection. Suffering was described as having no possibility to change a situation, for example, to “... not know what will happen next day, hour or minute, so they do what they can right now, uncertainty is also suffering for me.” (P10).

Those suffering in the images were perceived to experience a lack of choices, or situation of last-resort. Suffering is “Not having any other options”(P10), or it is also “a situation of hopelessness that creates suffering”(P16). Options are perceived to be limited or non-existent, or not a scenario the subjects in the image would choose.

Participants described those who were suffering in the images as facing situations, where, for example, “It looks unsafe”(P10) with no protection or privacy, and no ability to care for themselves or their families. As a participant suggests: “I get the feeling that this was the safest thing they could have done”(P10).

Participants described suffering as images which displayed vulnerability, especially when children were present. The presence of a child was seen as more impactful, and was described to “hit me harder when children are involved”(P13). Children were viewed as dependent, and particularly vulnerable.

The subjects in images were also perceived to be vulnerable in “having no place to close yourself off”(P02), or in facing the “indignity of being forced to sleep -in the cold, in front of others”(P02). Those who were pictured were exposed and vulnerable to not only the elements, but the gaze of others.

3.2.3. As conveyed through relatability or resonance

Suffering was recognized and described by participants in terms of what was evoked for them when viewing the image. Participants approached the study with reflexivity in their descriptions and though explaining their own feelings. This was evident throughout participant descriptions in the use of “I” statements and phrasing the discourse in

their narratives in the first person. Participants described how they felt and what they imagined when seeing the image. Participants crafted their discourse to describe “for me ...”(P01, P03, P04, P09, P10), or to be clear their interpretation is their own, rather than obvious fact, for example by using phrasing like “I have interpreted this to mean ...”(P04).

Participants recognized their own experience or directly witnessing someone in this situation from their own lives, as indicated in statements like “I have seen it happen with someone close to me in the past,” (P05b) and “I can relate to this picture quite a bit”(P05a). They described that they may find the situation in the image would feel a certain way if they were to be in it or going through it. The participants connected to what is happening in the image or they expressed how they emotionally or cognitively related to the suffering or the sufferer in the image and what they may be experiencing, for example in the statement “I almost feel I am there in the room with them” (P08). The participants described as an image “evokes feelings of insecurity in me or that what they see”(P02) and that the situation viewed “would feel extremely vulnerable to me”(P02).

Participants imagined the context or recognized a situation, and this relatability enables understanding, for example, that “... the reasons explained above make this image more relatable allowing for a heightened level of empathy”(P11). A participant described “I tried to identify or infer context to the images ...” (P11). As such, the viewer took from other experiences or knowledge in order to have a reference for, or be able to relate to, or better understand what they were seeing in the image. Similarly, the viewers’ emotions in seeing the images prompted sharing of general reflections about human emotions that “... we are often ashamed of our grief ...”(P07c) and also clear self-reflection as “I’ve been sitting here wondering ... why didn’t I react to the sample photos ...”(P08) referring to the curated selection of photos. Participants’ descriptions conveyed this importance of connection for the viewer to their own experience, knowledge or emotions, with what they are seeing in the images of suffering.

The suffering was perceived not just in emotions of the one who is suffering, but because the “people around this person are suffering”(P09) and can be seen in “what the people who are around express”.(P04) It was also emotions on a larger level, like “a community level and not one person’s grief or distress”(P06). Respondents described “both individual but also group suffering”(P08) and that suffering was “influenced by relationships around”(P07b) indicating exposure or experience of suffering could be on a group level or pointing to the emotional resonance of suffering. The suffering resonates among those in the image and as well to the viewer.

4. Discussion

This study explored perceived suffering in humanitarian images. The study used a novel approach to photo-elicitation, whereby participants chose images of suffering from a selection of curated photographs or another source of their choosing. The participants then submitted the images of suffering they identified, together with narrative descriptions of why they chose that image and how the image conveyed suffering. There exist many critiques of the use of images of suffering in media, and the potential detrimental or negative implications when photographs of distant suffering are displayed for far-away viewers. As a study designed to explore what viewers perceive to be suffering in a humanitarian image, it offers a unique contribution to a forward-moving field.

Perceived suffering in the present study was described in themes of decoded emotions and their facial or bodily expressions, a nexus of uncertainty and vulnerability, and as conveyed through relatability or resonance. As shown in the findings, facial or bodily expressions had a pivotal role in how participants describe suffering in the images. Distant suffering was framed by situations where overwhelming uncertainty and pervasive vulnerability were recognized. Finally, suffering was conveyed in the images through affective engagement in the eye of the beholder, based on reflexivity and recognition of the viewer’s own feelings and they perceive they may react themselves if in the situation

pictured.

Emotions featured prominently in the narrative descriptions of suffering in the images. The narratives described intense or particularly extreme emotions. For example, loneliness was described by participants as one of the emotions perceived in the present study. Similarly, it was found in a previous study of suffering associated with experiences of the 2004 tsunami disaster, where survivors described feeling their worlds were filled with loneliness and emptiness (Roxberg et al., 2010). In a previous study among Syrian refugees, the authors found suffering expressed in terms like sadness, hopelessness and grief (Maconick et al., 2020), each of which were found in the present study.

Participants noted clearly that suffering was visible in the facial expressions or body language of the person or people. This aligns with the descriptive visual analysis, where many of the selected photographs featured close-ups of faces marked by sadness, wailing, or expressions of grief. These reinforced the participants' emphasis on suffering as visible in the face and body. In an earlier study looking at types of images that best elicit a response from a viewer, sad facial expressions garner greater response than happy or neutral images (Burt & Strongman, 2005). This greater response can be achieved through "emotional contagion," whereby viewers vicariously "catch" the emotion on a victim's face (Small & Verrochi, 2009). Impressions of sad emotions were commonly described in the present study, including observations of these sad emotions on the face of people pictured. Lighting choices and close framing and in the images analysis emphasized emotional intensity, which may have amplified this sense of emotional contagion by drawing viewers into proximity with the subject's emotions.

Across existing literature, suffering is equated with emotions in descriptions of circumstances or experiences of suffering (McKinzie, 2018; Uno et al., 2017) including social suffering (Bracken et al., 1995; Maconick et al., 2020). In a study among Syrian refugees, emotions were tied to social suffering, and this was attributable to concern for family members remaining in Syria, who witnessed suffering or violence, or who experiences circumstances like displacement, or separation and loss of family (Maconick et al., 2020). Bracken et al. (1995) found that among people impacted by civil war, distress was linked to destruction of their relationships. The social and political suffering, as well as healing from suffering, were connected to the relationships people had with others. This was described in the present study as well, that suffering was connected to relations of those around. Explanations for perceived suffering in the images in the present study were described as due to the subject experiencing a loss, and particularly the loss of a loved one.

Grief has been described in earlier works as a type of suffering that is a composite of many emotions and cognitions including fear and sorrow (Gharmaz & Milligan, 2006) Grief was described in a number of contexts and examples in this study, among a group or single lone subjects, and "people in uncontrolled grief" was described by participants. It may be one of those emotions that is more explicit as a display of suffering, as suggested in earlier analyses where the press depicted deaths of Iraqi children and the grief of their parents (Wells, 2007).

Perceived suffering in images was described as a personal internal experience in the present study, and an internal emotional experience for the sufferer. This can be found in classic work in the field of suffering in medicine and health by Eric Cassell (Cassel, 1982) stating that "suffering is ultimately a personal matter". Examples can be found when a patient suffers from psychological and social aspects of a condition, and in an example from Cassell, a patient suffers not from nociceptive aspects of an illness, but rather from her perception of the future. A seminal piece from Laurel Archer Copp (1974) refers similarly to the psychological and emotional role within the experience of suffering, when the anticipation of pain, rather than the pain itself, caused suffering and how compassion and listening can resolve a deepening suffering (Capp, 1990).

In several images, the presence of symbolic elements such as burial rituals, medical uniforms, or Red Cross insignia situated individual

suffering within broader social or communal contexts. These visual cues likely contributed to participants' interpretation of suffering as shared or collective, rather than limited to an individual.

The visual analysis revealed that the inclusion of children, particularly those appearing alone, was a recurring feature in the images. Their presence reflected perceived vulnerability, echoing prior scholarship on the symbolic power of lone children in humanitarian photography (Wells, 2007). Children, particularly lone children affected by conflict or in crisis are regarded as iconic images and have been previously used in fundraising appeals (Wells, 2007). This reflects general societal acceptance that adults must provide care for children, and that a lone sad child then appears abandoned. The viewer of this lone child may be prompted to feel the adult "role" of the missing caregiver (Wells, 2007). A lone child staring straight ahead into the camera may be considered iconic (Joye, 2009) and used in appeals. Though, it does not reflect the reality for children in disasters, but rather, the child's family and local support are simply removed from view (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1997; Wells, 2007) for a more impactful photograph.

There was an importance for participants in the present study to find relevance or a means to connect with what was pictured in the image. In several images, the presence of symbolic elements such as burial rituals, medical uniforms, or Red Cross insignia situated individual suffering within broader social or communal contexts. These visual cues likely contributed to participants' interpretation, suggesting suffering as shared or collective, rather than limited to an individual.

Participants indicated a communal understanding of emotions they saw in the image, and expressed a shared empathy (Zurek & Scheithauer, 2017), such as in the statement "we are often ashamed of our grief ..." suggesting a universality or socio-cultural nature of empathy. Participants also used first-person and self-reflexive statements in their submissions, such as "I have interpreted this to mean" or "For me [this means] ...". In this way, participants positioned themselves in a clearly subjective stance in relation to the suffering they were viewing, and recognized their interpretation reflected their personal experience. They even projected themselves, for example, by stating "I almost feel I am there ..." or explaining how they would handle situation, indicating affective empathy (Håkansson Eklund & Summer Meranius, 2021).

Each viewer of a photograph may see it differently than as intended by the photographer, in light of cultural knowledge, experiences, and insights each viewer brings (Collier et al., 2009). Participants in the present study looked to equate what they were observing with a previous experience or way to relate to suffering they observed in the image. The viewer of suffering, or viewer of the photograph, determines how what is observed equates with "suffering" to them. A photographer can draw attention to circumstances, and even generate expressions of solidarity for one who is suffering (Calain, 2013). The power of interpretation or influence of an image, however, lies truly with the viewer as to how an image is perceived. Renowned photography critic, Susan Sontag explains: "The photographer's intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it" (Sontag, 2003). There may always be a gap between the photographer's intention, the meaning of it, and how the photo is used (Sontag, 1973). In the present study, the viewers, in their own free-will or their self-regulation (Baudrillard, 1994) hold the power in influencing what messages are promulgated towards them and how they are received.

4.1. Considerations

Participant submissions varied in quantity of text, from as few as a dozen words to elaborate paragraphs. While lengthier "rich" descriptions are often touted as the measure of quality in data, brief and concise submissions or "thin" data were also valuable and insightful (Brekhus et al., 2005). In the present study, particularly short or concise statements drew attention to specific emotions or activity. This ensured clarity in the participant's narrative and left emphasis on impressionable

aspects the respondent chose to convey. However, many photo-elicitation studies use interviews, rather than submission of written narratives. Interviews may have provided an opportunity to elicit more data or to obtain deeper insights from participants than the written narratives. The design of the study using email submission may have allowed participants to take time to reflect and craft their submission, as opposed to what may have been obtained spontaneously during an interview.

The participants in this study were chosen because of their professional experience and likely pre-understanding and familiarity with concepts depicted in humanitarian images. The participants were informed of the aim of the study and nature of the media they would be viewing by participating in the study. Their perspectives were sought after for the insights or perspectives from their experience, knowledge or training that would be relevant to humanitarian images and the situations of people living in humanitarian settings. The study was not designed to obtain representative findings that could be generalized, but rather to add to a deeper understanding of perceived suffering within humanitarian images. Conducting this type of study with other samples, or other types of images of suffering, may have different findings.

4.2. Conclusions

Perceived suffering in humanitarian images was described in themes of decoded emotions and their facial or bodily expressions, a nexus of uncertainty and vulnerability, and as conveyed through relatability or resonance. These findings highlight that distant suffering takes expression through visual cues of emotions or relations, and less so in the external circumstances. For professionals, training to recognize such cues may aid engagement and response to distress and distant suffering in an empathic way. Humanitarian actors may also consider this in their public communications and advocacy work. The findings also contribute to the understanding of perceived suffering as a deeply personal experience, as well as a socially resonant phenomenon. Interdisciplinary approaches are needed to address forms of suffering for individuals and within their broader socio-cultural context.

For research, this study builds knowledge about ways suffering is communicated and perceived, and how viewers interpret and emotionally engage with images of suffering. Future studies could build upon this foundation to conduct quantitative investigations of aspects like emotional resonance, vulnerability, and relational connection. By advancing understanding about how suffering is conveyed and perceived, professionals and researchers are better positioned to improve recognition and response to suffering in practice and advance further inquiry into the complexities of suffering in both local and global context.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jill W. Åhs: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Henrik Eriksson:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Monir Mazaheri:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Data curation.

Ethics and consent

This study was reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Etikprövningsmyndigheten) with the approval number: Dnr 2019-06412, dated February 11, 2020. The research was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Declaration of AI use

The authors did not use AI tools in this work.

Funding statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.102404>.

Data availability

The qualitative data generated during the study are not available due to the inclusion of information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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