

Publication

The use of empirical research in bioethics: a survey of researchers in twelve European countries

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Author(s) Wangmo, Tenzin; Provoost, Veerle

Author(s) at UniBasel [Wangmo, Tenzin](#) ;

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Background The use of empirical research methods in bioethics has been increasing in the last decades. It has resulted in discussions about the 'empirical turn of bioethics' and raised questions related to the value of empirical work for this field, methodological questions about its quality and rigor, and how this integration of the normative and the empirical can be achieved. The aim of this paper is to describe the attitudes of bioethics researchers in this field towards the use of empirical research, and examine their actual conduct: whether they use empirical research methods (and if so, what methods), and whether (and how) they have made attempts at integrating the empirical and the normative. **Methods** An anonymous online survey was conducted to reach scholars working in bioethics/biomedical ethics/ethics institutes or centers in 12 European countries. A total of 225 bioethics researchers participated in the study. Of those, 200 questionnaires were fully completed, representing a response rate of 42.6%. The results were analysed using descriptive statistics. **Results** Most respondents (n = 175; 87.5%) indicated that they use or have used empirical methods in their work. A similar proportion of respondents (61.0% and 59.0%) reported having had at least some training in qualitative or quantitative methods, respectively. Among the 'empirical researchers', more than a fifth (22.9%) had not received any methodological training. It appears that only 6% or less of the 'empirical researchers' considered themselves experts in the methods (qualitative or quantitative) that they have used. Only 35% of the scholars who have used empirical methods reported having integrated empirical data with normative analysis, whereas for their current projects, 59.8% plan to do so. **Conclusions** There is a need to evaluate the current educational programs in bioethics and to implement rigorous training in empirical research methods to ensure that 'empirical researchers' have the necessary skills to conduct their empirical research in bioethics. Also imperative is clear guidance on the integration of the normative and the empirical so that researchers who plan to do so have necessary tools and competences to fulfil their goals.

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