

Publication

Acceptable objectives of empirical research in bioethics: a qualitative exploration of researchers' views

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0.0.1 Background

This is the first qualitative study to investigate how researchers, who do empirical work in bioethics, relate to objectives of empirical research in bioethics (ERiB). We explore reasons that make some objectives more acceptable, while others are deemed less acceptable.

0.0.2 Methods

Using qualitative exploratory study design, we interviewed bioethics researchers, who were selected to represent different types of scholars working in the field. The interview data of 25 participants were analyzed in this paper using thematic analysis.

0.0.3 Results

From the eight objectives presented to the study participants, understanding the context of a bioethical issue and identifying ethical issues in practice received unanimous agreement. Participants also supported other objectives of ERiB but with varying degrees of agreement. The most contested objectives were striving to draw normative recommendations and developing and justifying moral principles. The is-ought gap was not considered an obstacle to ERiB, but rather a warning sign to critically reflect on the normative implications of empirical results.

0.0.4 Conclusions

Our results show that the most contested objectives are also the more ambitious ones, whereas the least contested ones focus on producing empirical results. The potential of empirical research to be useful for bioethics was mostly based on the reasoning pattern that empirical data can provide a testing ground for elements of normative theory. Even though empirical research can inform many parts of bioethical inquiry, normative expertise is recommended to guide ERiB. The acceptability of ambitious objectives for ERiB boils down to finding firm ground for the integration of empirical facts in normative inquiry.

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