Author's response to reviews

Title: Empirical research in medical ethics: how conceptual accounts on normative-empirical collaboration may improve research practice.

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Editors,

Enclosed you will find the second revision of our paper “Empirical research in medical ethics: how conceptual accounts on normative-empirical collaboration may improve research practice” (former title: “The challenge of empirical research in medical ethics: how conceptual accounts on normative-empirical collaboration may improve research practice”).

We are, again, indebted to Michael Dunn and Guy Widdershoven for their helpful further comments. You will find a point-by-point response to the reviewers’ concerns on the following pages. Two versions of the revised manuscript have been submitted online: One with tracked changes and one without marking the changes.

Thank you for the opportunity to resubmit our article to “BMC Medical Ethics”.

Yours sincerely, (on behalf of the other authors)

Sabine Salloch
Response to the reviewers’ comments

Review 1

Reviewer: Michael Dunn

Reviewer’s report:

Let me begin by thanking the authors for the comprehensive and considered way in which they have addressed the points I raised in my initial review. I felt that the revised version of the manuscript is significantly improved, and I do not have any further major revisions that I would like to see the authors make. One residual concern that I have is that, when scrutinized closely, the two models of Birnbacher and Leget et al can be said to be devised in ways that avoid them committing themselves to any meta-ethical presuppositions. This is, of course, the authors’ rationale for selecting these models over other approaches to integrating normative and empirical analysis, such as the hermeneutic or symbiotic model. However, I am content to conclude that my issue with this point falls within the scope of academic disagreement, and does not require major revision.

Minor Essential Revisions

P.10-11: I felt this paragraph confuses normative- and meta-ethical considerations in accounting for the integration of ethical and empirical analyses. When the authors discuss models which rest upon a specific account of ethics (phenomenological; hermeneutic etc.), it seems to me that it is the issue of being open to various meta-ethical, rather than normative ethical, commitments that supports the authors’ choosing the two conceptual accounts detailed. Nothing about being a narrative ethicist, for example, would seem to presuppose that ethicist commits him/herself to any normative theoretical position, but certainly is likely to reflect some commitment to what s/he takes ethics to mean, and require, from broader philosophical premises. I suggest removing the discussion of normative ethical backgrounds and approaches from this paragraph.
Thank you for pointing out the difficult relationship between normative-ethical and meta-ethical aspects in this paragraph. Eventually, we decided to restrict ourselves - as you suggested - to the meta-ethical aspects (see p. 10, paragraph 3 f.). Anyhow, we would like to maintain the position that Birnbacher and Leget are committed to at least some meta-ethical stances (this was the point you left open for academic disagreement) such as a cognitivist view of ethics and an acknowledgement of the fact-value-distinction. Based on a non-cognitivist view of ethics it would be difficult to apply criteria such as clarity, unambiguousness and plausibility (Birnbacher) to normative statements or to speak of a moral judgment proper (Leget et al.). A similar point can be made about the commitment to a distinction between empirical and normative claims (“facts” and “values”). Without this distinction the different stages which are described in the two models would become more or less incomprehensible. We would appreciate very much to initiate further discussion about the theoretical presuppositions of the two models (for example, if their may be normative-ethical theories in a weaker and in a stronger sense) which are, however, beyond the scope of this article.

Review 3

Reviewer: Guy Widdershoven

Reviewer's report:

The revisions and responses to the reviewers are well done. Some minor points remain (discretionary revisions):

1. The title has been improved, but still raises questions. Why ‘The challenge of’? What is meant here? A suggestion is to replace ‘The challenge of…’ by: ‘Integrating…’.

2. On page 13, hermeneutics and reflective equilibrium are presented as different from the approaches presented in the following pages. I appreciate the reference to alternative approaches. Yet, the differences mentioned are not totally convincing. What is meant when the authors say that hermeneutics and reflective equilibrium imply a specific account of ethics? In what sense is a deliberative (hermeneutics) or coherentist (reflective equilibrium) approach (logically) different from a cognitivist view on ethics which is said to be present in Birnbacher’s
model? It might be more appropriate to refer to hermeneutics and reflective equilibrium as alternative conceptual accounts of the normative-empirical relationship based on different (meta-ethical and methodological) assumptions. This entails that hermeneutics and reflective equilibrium entail specific suggestions for combining empirical research and normative analysis in a structured way, different from the models presented here (as is rightly stated on page 19). This article is of course not the place to examine the differences in-depth.

We would like to thank the reviewer for his additional remarks. Regarding the title we decided to rephrase it in a more simple way which, hopefully, avoids the irritation caused by the word “challenge”.

Regarding your second point, we decided to refrain from a deeper analysis of normative-ethical positions and their relevance for concepts of empirical-normative collaboration (see p. 10, paragraph 3 f.). We restricted ourselves to pointing out two metaethical presuppositions which underlie the models of Birnbacher and Leget et al. (see also our answer to reviewer 1). Furthermore, we alluded to hermeneutic ethics and reflective equilibrium as providing alternative accounts of normative-empirical relationship.