Reviewer’s report

**Title:** Bridging the gap: conceptual accounts and research practice in empirical medical ethics

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 31 August 2011

**Reviewer:** Michael Dunn

**Reviewer’s report:**

Thank you for the invitation to review this paper.

This paper presents an argument for the closer integration of theoretical accounts of empirical ethics research with studies that seek to draw upon empirical data to address normative ethical questions in medicine.

It is good to see an article that explores the foundations of empirical ethics research, and I find myself in broad agreement with the authors’ central claim and the four concrete standards that are proposed on page 14. I think it is fair to say that this paper is less substantial and less significant a contribution to the empirical ethics literature than those papers that seek to develop novel conceptual and methodological accounts of empirical ethics, but the message being conveyed in the paper is, I think, an important one. In addition, the paper is clearly structured and generally well written.

However, notwithstanding the clear benefits of this paper, I do have some issues that I would like to raise with the authors. These issues concern objections to some of the arguments put forward, and to points of clarification.

**Major Compulsory Revisions**

1. The value of descriptive ethics research. The authors – rightly, in my view – claim that empirical medical ethics research should set out to inform normative argument around practical ethical issues in medical practice. I agree that empirical ethics is distinct from descriptive ethics in that it sets out to address normative, rather than descriptive, research questions. However, to draw the conclusion that descriptive ethics lacks value because it fails to connect to the normative debate seems a little hasty. One could imagine a social scientist interested in the everyday moral dynamics of medical practice responding that without this deep, systematic analysis of the relevant experiences and attitudes of doctors and other health professionals in their work, it would be unclear what practical ethical issues were worthy of further ethical analysis by philosophers (or indeed empirical ethicists).

Moreover, given that medical ethics research is now well-established across cultural contexts, this exploratory descriptive analysis looks therefore to be an important first step on the road to identifying the normative questions that are directly relevant to practitioners and other stakeholders facing ethical challenges.
in health care. As the authors point out, such descriptive research is not empirical ethics research, but it is of no less value for that reason alone. I am happy for the authors to disagree with me on this, but I think the paper would be improved by at least giving consideration to this role for descriptive ethics research in medical ethics.

2. 'Bridging the gap'. At the heart of the authors’ arguments is the claim that empirical studies in medical ethics can be improved by drawing on conceptual accounts of the integration of empirical and normative research. I have a number of concerns in relation to this. I deal with the first concern here and the others in the following comments. First, it is rather unclear whether the authors want the reader to conclude that the value of an empirical ethics project stands and falls on whether it draws upon one or more conceptual accounts, or whether this judgment depends also on the convincingness of the conceptual account being drawn upon. After all, as the authors acknowledge, there are a number of such accounts, many of which are justified on the basis of accounts of ethics drawn from a range of different philosophical heritages. Thus, if I were to find myself in disagreement with the meta-ethical claims that underpin Birnbacher’s model, it seems that I would also likely to have problems both with the methodological strategies he proposes, and, consequently, the convincingness of the normative claims developed on the basis of empirical data collected from within this model. Do the authors want this question to lie in the background, and not to explicitly consider it? If so, a brief justification is, I think, required.

3. Theoretical justification and methodological commitment. The nature of the linking of studies into the conceptual accounts that the authors put forward also raises some uncertainty. I am uncertain in the description of the Bendiane et al. study on pages 10-12, whether this linking is being proposed post hoc ["The study’s implications for the normative debate may be clarified by linking it to a conceptual approach to empirical ethics", page 11], or as a way of formulating a pre-emptive and fundamental critique of the nature, purpose and design of this project. Retroactively attempting to align an empirical project with a theoretical account of the justification of combining empirical and normative analysis looks to be flawed because the varied theoretical justifications that lie at the heart of this ‘integration project’ seem to give rise — a priori — to a set of methodological commitments that cannot be used to shape a particular project, regardless of the closeness of fit.

This also draws attention to another point of uncertainty: what exactly do the authors mean when they claim that there is a two-way relationship between the empirical work and the conceptual account? What is the validity in empirically 'testing' such an account, and would the evaluative standards here be internal to the justification of the account itself? Is this about ensuring the right kinds of methods fit within the methodological frameworks developed out of the conceptual accounts, or is it about the entire re-development of the methodological framework and conceptual account itself? An example or two and a bit more detail might help to elucidate matters here.
**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests