Reviewer’s report

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

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Reviewer: Guy Widdershoven

Reviewer’s report:

This paper examines the cooperation between empirical and normative disciplines in medical ethics. It discusses two models for cooperation. Based on these models, two examples of studies in empirical ethics are criticized and suggestions for improvement are developed. The paper ends with some recommendations for the practice of empirical ethics research.

The paper shows good knowledge of the theoretical debate on and the current practice of empirical ethics. It rightly puts in question the lack of actual and fruitful cooperation between empirical and normative disciplines in much of what is presented as empirical ethics work. Yet, the solutions which are presented by the authors are not fully convincing. How are the models which are discussed related to one another, and what is their relationship with the four steps presented in the last part of the paper?

Major revisions:

1. The theoretical part of the paper raises questions. What exactly does the model of Birnbacher entail? Why are the four parts necessary? Why is it a model of ethical reasoning, and how is it related to other models? What is the relationship between empirical information and normative conclusions in each of the parts? What relationship between empirical and normative aspects is for example characteristic for the implementation phase? A more thorough presentation of the work of Birnbacher is needed to clarify these issues. Similar questions can be raised about the approach of Leget et al. What does the metaphor of the ellipse mean? The paper would be much more interesting if the two proposals would be critically examined instead of just being sketched.

2. The two examples of shortcomings of empirical ethics research also raise questions. Why were these two studies chosen? They do not seem to be very relevant in the field. Moreover, the criticism of the two studies is rather thin. Why would the first study be better if it would be presented as helpful to implementation? The last sentence of the second study is criticized; why is this one sentence of the study so important? In fact, the criticism does not seem valid. The sentence merely states that more knowledge of palliative care would improve end-of-life care; this does not entail a negative stance towards legalising euthanasia (since legalisation of euthanasia is not at odds with high quality palliative care). Even if the criticism would have been correct, it would not entail the need for involving representatives of normative disciplines in the research, but only more refined use of logic and argumentation (which is not the
prerequisite of normative disciplines, but can and also should be part of empirical disciplines).

3. The four steps in the last part of the paper are certainly relevant. Yet, their relationship to the rest of the paper is not evident.

4. Instead of a final section 'summary' (which is more of an abstract), a section with conclusions is needed.

Suggestions/discretionary revisions:

5. The paper might be improved by starting with examples of problems in empirical ethics work (focusing on the lack of integration of empirical and normative analysis). Then proposals for improvement could be presented (such as Birnbacher and Leget et al, but maybe also other examples), with a critical examination of how they would work and how they would be of help in preventing the problems found in the examples analyzed before. Finally the authors could discuss what is missing in these proposals/models, and what they want to add. This would provide a clearer structure and a more convincing line of argumentation.

6. A remark on the title and the use of headings. The title of the paper is not really illuminating. The phrase ‘Bridging the gap’ has been used too often in this context. The subtitle is not specific enough; it does not clarify what the paper is about. The heading of the sections is not very helpful. Why is section 2 called discussion? The subsections 1-3 could be separate sections (preferably in another order, as mentioned above).

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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'