Reviewer's report

Title: Research across the disciplines: Quality criteria for empirical-ethical studies

Version: 2 Date: 19 October 2013

Reviewer: Christoph Rehmann-Sutter

Reviewer's report:

In comparison with the first version the manuscript has been much improved. The formal flaws that I have mentioned in my first review, which have made it nearly impossible to properly understand and review the arguments in the first version have been resolved. The text is now mature to be reviewed for its argumentative quality.

1. Does the debate present a novel argument, or a novel insight into existing work?
   - Yes, the paper wants to contribute in a novel way to a discussion in bioethics about how to integrate empirical sociology in „empirical ethics“ studies and in the reporting from such studies. This is timely and worth to be done from a variety of perspectives. The approach that the authors have taken (combined inductive and deductive strategy; road map approach; group discussion) is promising.

2. Does the debate address an important problem of interest to a broad biomedical audience?
   - Yes. There is currently a need for clarifying methodological papers in empirical bioethics, which address the relation between descriptive sociological and prescriptive ethical arguments.

3. Is the piece well argued and referenced?
   - No. The criteria that are presented in the 8 tables are not argumentatively justified. They are just falling out of the blue, presented like the minutes of a brainstorming session. In addition some of the questions in the tables are poorly worded and difficult to understand. Some questions also make difficult philosophical assumptions, without explaining them.

The new methodology section (pp. 8-9) only provides information about the discussion process of the group of authors but does not disclose (on an argumentative basis) how, i.e. for what reasons the group arrived to each of the results that it presents. We do not know which publications have been included in the literature review, how this selection has been made, why certain other texts obviously have been excluded, and what has been taken from these texts that are already existing. The group’s own proposals, which are presented in the “Discussion” section (this title is misleading by the way, should rather be “Results”) are not explained with reference to the literature. Therefore it is difficult, or impossible for the reader to see which criteria are novel proposals by these authors and what has already been proposed by others before. This is an intransparent procedure. The reader completely depends on the “eminence” of
the group of authors, instead of clarity by evidence and argument. Therefore the paper does not meet the quality criteria, which it is itself suggesting.

4. Has the author used logical arguments and sound reasoning?
- Not sufficiently. The main results are not explicitly argued for.

5. Is the piece written well enough for publication? – I cannot recommend it for publication at this stage.

Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore) – None at this stage.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct) – None at this stage.

Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached) – The paper wants much too much to be possible. The grouping of possible ‘quality points to consider’ into the 8 tables is explained with the road map analogy and sounds reasonable. But then each of the tables contains 5-8 criteria in the shape of questions, 48 criteria in total. Some criteria (e.g. compatibility and relevance in table 2) are interesting. But what is meant with “theoretical compatibility”? The brief explanations on p. 13 remain very sketchy. The same for relevance. Other criteria (e.g. “How do socio-theoretical, medico-theoretical, or other theoretical frameworks fit into the ethical or meta-ethical framework?” in table 2) remain difficult to understand. How should a socio-theoretical framework (What do you mean by that? For example the ideas of Grounded Theory, or the ideas of symbolic interactionism that have been important for Anselm Strauss?) “fit” into an ethical or meta-ethical framework? I have difficulties to understand what could be meant with this fitness requirement. But I believe that the authors have good reasons to propose this. Then they should explain them carefully.

We would also need a clarification of the ideas of the empirical and the ethical, in order to understand why empirical and ethical research questions can be explicitly distinguished (as is suggested in the first point in table 1). We have a long debate in philosophy about the division or interconnection between the ethical and the empirical, which is not reflected in this paper. Therefore a requirement to “distinguish” them remains very vague.

I stop with these examples from the first 2 tables and do not discuss the rest. I believe it has become clear why I think that the manuscript needs a substantial rewriting in its substantial parts.

**Level of interest:** An article of insufficient interest to warrant publication in a scientific/medical journal

**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.