Reviewer's report

Title: A Systematic Review of Empirical Bioethics Methodologies

Version: 1 Date: 19 September 2014

Reviewer: Bert Molewijk

Reviewer's report:

It was a true pleasure to review this paper. This paper is of great importance for (the progress within) the field of empirical bioethics, it is very clearly written (even for outsiders understandable), transparent and analytical, yet not criticizing a specific group of researchers. It has some concrete suggestions for researchers in the field. My compliments!

In order to further improve some parts of the paper I have the following suggestions.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. On page 4 the authors mention that they focus on papers which draw normative conclusions. I agree with this focus, however it is important to make explicit why the authors did so (is this already related somehow to their pre understanding of EB?), and what the consequences were for not including papers that not (clearly) draw normative conclusions (See also p.3, De Vries 2004).

2. Within the enumeration of three research strategies, on page 3, I miss any reference to a fourth category (as described in Molewijk 2004) which does not refer to any moral theory at all (sometimes anti-theory) and merely takes into account narrative enquiries etc. I think it is important in this paper to at least refer to literature on anti-theory in ethics.

3. The last sentences of the conclusion section on page 14 needs some clarification (what do the authors mean with -maintain- : has there ever been a singular and coherent identity?) and also a bit more elaboration about the limits or threats of heterogeneity in the field of EB. I think this can contribute to the relevance of the paper in the first place.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. The authors write about three central questions that are central to the planning of a EB study, such as: how a normative conclusion is justified. They do not distinguish or mention another category: what the normative status of the normative conclusion should be or become. It might be helpful to distinguish between the justifications of the conclusion itself and the normative status of the normative conclusion.

2. I feel that the authors should reflect a bit more on the term consultative: what
does that entail exactly? Which aims, what status?

3. It became not clear to me why there was a second search, and why not presented it as one search?

4. The authors are implicit in their reasoning when writing on page 12 that: these approaches might fail to meet the criteria to qualify as research. It might be interesting to clarify their criteria here but also to elaborate a bit more on this in general.

5. I was a bit surprised and confused by the fact that the authors already seem to start with some results or conclusions of the review process within the Background section.

Discretionary Revisions

1. Page 7: could you make more explicit what you think that pragmatic hermeneutics and integrative empirical ethics may compromise elements of the consultative model?

2. Overall, I feel that it would be worthwhile to distinguish conceptually between an EB that uses empirical data and an EB that uses the opinions and normative conclusions from stakeholders within the EB research.

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

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.