Reviewer’s report

Title: An update on the "empirical turn" in bioethics: Analysis of empirical research in nine bioethics journals

Version: 0 Date: 19 Oct 2017

Reviewer: Sabine Salloch

Reviewer’s report:

The authors provide an update on the so-called "empirical turn" with respect to the quantity and character of empirical articles published in nine bioethics journals. They explicitly refer to the methodology of Borry et al.'s previous study which makes their enterprise particularly helpful. The description of the research field and the existing literature are excellent. This is a very clear and concise paper so that I only have a few remarks:

My main concern relates to the framing of the study as a systematic review (SR): SRs typically start from a clear-cut (usually empirical) research question and then synthesize the knowledge on this subject which can be found in the scientific literature. From my perspective the present study has a slightly different aim in providing an overview on empirical research in bioethics (and not on a particular study subject). In addition, the methodology does not follow the typical SR strategy, e.g. there are no search terms and there is no critical appraisal of the literature included in the review. Also the restriction to nine journals is not the usual way proceeded in SRs. I would suggest not to frame this work as a SR, but apart from that keep it as it is. The methodology is described clearly.

One minor point:

"Two authors examined the abstract and methods section of each of the 1146 manuscripts (Figure 1), in accordance with the standards established in Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses - PRISMA [22]." (p. 8) This was not fully clear to me: Did you check whether the publications are in accordance with the PRISMA statement? Or did you apply the PRISMA statement yourselves? In the latter case my concern regarding the "SR framing" of your study becomes relevant.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess
Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

I am able to assess the statistics

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

Declaration of competing interests
Please complete a declaration of competing interests, considering the following questions:

1. Have you in the past five years received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

2. Do you hold any stocks or shares in an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

3. Do you hold or are you currently applying for any patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

4. Have you received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organization that holds or has applied for patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

5. Do you have any other financial competing interests?

6. Do you have any non-financial competing interests in relation to this paper?

If you can answer no to all of the above, write 'I declare that I have no competing interests' below. If your reply is yes to any, please give details below.

I declare that I have no competing interests.

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal. I understand that my name will be included on my report to the authors and, if the manuscript is accepted for publication, my named report including any attachments I upload will be posted on the website along with the authors' responses. I agree for my report to be made available under an Open Access Creative Commons
CC-BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). I understand that any comments which I do not wish to be included in my named report can be included as confidential comments to the editors, which will not be published.

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal