Reviewer’s report

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

**Version:** 1 **Date:** 13 Dec 2017

**Reviewer:** Marcel Mertz

**Reviewer’s report:**

I thank the authors for the revisions and for the elaborated comments. Most of the points I raised have been convincingly addressed, and I consider the paper now clearer regarding its aim. Also, its statements are now more in line with the limitations given.

However, there are two further points I have to mention (though one will just be a suggestion):

CRITICAL COMMENT:

Abstract: "[...] to inform the ongoing debate about the value and the quality of empirical research for bioethics."

Manuscript p. 6, lines 132-136: "Up to date information on the empirical trend and the nature of publications in bioethics (even from nine bioethics journals) is informative for researchers carrying out empirical research in bioethics who may be concerned about the quality as well as the rigor of empirical methods used."

Manuscript p. 20, lines 445-446: "[...] and could inform the debate about the methodological questions related to the rigor of empirical methods used [...]"

Although the authors now say more explicitly how the debate can be informed by their study - which I appreciate, of course -, and also how the debate can be informed by similar future studies, I am not convinced that they actually will inform us empirical ethicists about the quality or rigor of the empirical methods used. This is because nothing in the results of such studies (incl. the study of the authors) says something about methodological quality or even about reporting quality of the empirical ethics studies reviewed.

Knowing which methods were used (qualitative, quantitative, mixed), or which topics were researched, or how many authors the papers have etc. does not give us, as I reckon, any information about the quality of the respective research, or about methodological problems associated with empirical ethics research. Furthermore, if an empirical ethicist is concerned about the quality and the rigor of empirical methods used, I don't think s/he would look at such studies in the first place for learning about how "to do it better", or for learning how to better appraise the quality of empirical ethics studies from other authors. Rather, literature explicitly discussing and proposing quality criteria for empirical ethics research would lie in the focus, or
more exactly, methodological literature about how to reasonably use empirical methods in general (of which there is plenty available). If empirical studies are considered for this, I guess this would rather be studies or "meta-research" papers that actually "measured" the quality of published empirical ethics studies, and/or identified shortcomings in methodology or reporting.

For latter research, however, an approach as, for example, suggested by the first reviewer in her comments would be necessary, e.g. using PRISMA statements as an analysis matrix for checking how good the reporting of published SRs actually is (if SRs would be the object of the research, of course - this is just meant as an illustrating example!). Identifying publication trends and general descriptive characteristics of published papers will not suffice as an approach for this, irrespective of how many papers, journals, languages etc. are included in the future.

Therefore, I think that the authors have to argue in which respect results of such studies (again incl. their own) say something about the quality of empirical ethics research (or at least could say something - e.g. only having one author for a study using qualitative content analysis could be seen as an indicator for reduced or problematic quality, as often, employing at least two authors that counter-check their coding is seen as "good practice" there). Or alternatively, the authors should rather delete the reference regarding quality and rigor, and should only propose that their results inform the debate about "whether there is continued increase in empirical work in (at least) the same nine journals, [and] if so, [about] what are the characteristics of these empirical publications, for example, which methods are used" (p. 6, lines 130.132), as this is something the chosen approach definitely can do.

SUGGESTION:

p. 14, 306-307: "Our results put forth four valuable findings for scholars working in the field of empirical research in bioethics and "empirical bioethics".

It might be helpful to the reader if the authors "announce" these four valuable findings in a few words. For example: "Our results put forth four valuable findings for scholars working in the field of empirical research in bioethics and 'empirical bioethics': (1) increase of empirical studies done; (2) slowing of the rate of growth; (3) dominance of quantitative studies; (4) relevance of experiences of physicians, nurses, and patients" - or something like this.

MISCELLANEOUS:

I gladly grant permission to borrow from my words for the revision on page 16, lines 347-349.

**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?**
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