Author’s response to reviews

Title: MAPPING, FRAMING, SHAPING: A FRAMEWORK FOR EMPIRICAL BIOETHICS RESEARCH PROJECTS

Authors:

Richard Huxtable (r.huxtable@bristol.ac.uk)
Jonathan Ives (j.ives@bristol.ac.uk)

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Author’s response to reviews:

Dear Dr Emmerich,

Thank you for the opportunity to make changes to the paper. We appreciate the time spent by the reviewers giving us valuable feedback. We have listed the nine points below, followed by our response to each and the location in the paper that changes have been made.

There are a few points that we have chosen not to address, not because we disagree with reviewers entirely but because to make the suggested changes would turn the paper into a completely different beast. We have explained our reasoning where this applies, and we hope that the clarification and signposting we have added throughout will help make our aims clearer and at the same time explain our position in relation to some of the reviewers’ suggestions.

Point 1: Reviewer 1

At the beginning of the article (p. 4) different ways of using empirical data in bioethics are mentioned. If I understand correctly in the remainder of the article the authors particularly focus on "attempts to fully integrate empirical analysis into ethical theorizing” and introduce their own methodology in this field. There are more comprehensive lists (or even classifications) of what empirical research can contribute to bioethical analysis in the literature which could be cited here, e.g.


Response (see p5-6)

Thank you for raising this point, although we fear it may be based on a slight misunderstanding, which highlights the need for us to clarify our intentions for the paper.

Our aim is not to present a methodology to “fully integrate empirical analysis into ethical theorizing” but rather to shift our gaze away from that specific focus (which, as you say, has received a great deal of attention in the literature) onto the broad structure of the research project as a whole. We are not presenting a methodology for integrated empirical bioethics, but suggesting a way to think about phases of empirical bioethics research (which, necessarily, leads to using some method of integration).

We hope that this satisfactorily explains why we have not surveyed more of the literature here, and why we do not feel we need to refer specifically to the papers suggested. We could certainly find a way to reference them, but we do not feel it is needed to make the point we are trying to make.

The reviewer’s comment does, however, lead us to see a need to make our aims in the paper much clearer, and we have added text throughout to try to do this. We hope that this approach addresses the concern raised here.

Point 2: Reviewer 1

The role of ethical theory could be addressed more in detail which would also contribute to further clarify in how far the suggested methodology is specific for empirical bioethics. There are already some nice methodologies which more explicitly describe issues of normative-empirical interaction at different stages of a research process (e.g. Leget 2009; Frith 2012). They are cited in the paper. Compared to this the "Mapping-Framing-Shaping" framework seems to be less complex: "Mapping" mainly refers to literature review, "Framing" to the empirical research and "Shaping" to the drawing of normative conclusions. Even if I understand that the present paper does not explicitly focus on normative-empirical interaction the authors could comment on why they suggest a comparatively simple methodology which widely separates normative and empirical parts of the project.

Response (p5-6)

We take this point, but again we fear this is based on a misunderstanding of our aim in this paper. We are not trying to outline a methodology for integrating the empirical and the normative, but rather trying to explore the research process more widely.
Given our focus, we do not feel it would be useful to add discussion of the role of ethical theory because, as we hope will be clear from the additions we have made, this would deviate significantly from our aims and make it a different paper entirely.

We have added more text to clarify what we are and are not doing. We are not proposing a comparatively simple methodology for research, and we are not suggesting a separation of the empirical and the normative parts. Rather, we are articulating the broader phases of the research process, within which those complex methodologies for integration might lie.

Point 3: Reviewer 1

My third concern relates to a point which is already addressed in the limitations section: the framework does not seem to be very specific for empirical bioethics. Even the drawing of normative conclusions is not something special. Instead formulating implications for practice is a typical part of the "conclusions" section of biomedical and many other types of research. What might be specific in empirical bioethics is the explicit dealing with normative theories and the clear focus on ethically controversial issues. Highlighting in how far this is mirrored in the "Mapping-Framing-Shaping" framework might make even clearer that a framework for empirical bioethics is presented here and not a framework for other fields of research.

Response (p15)

We take this point, but we feel we have explicitly addressed it already where we consider the critical point that what we have described may be applied generically to much other (non-bioethics) research.

Our response to this is that what would make a project distinctively ‘empirical bioethics’ is the presence of a ‘bridging’ methodology in the shaping phase.

We have, for clarity, described a few such bridging methodologies, drawing on some of the literature cited by the reviewer, and explained more fully what a ‘bridging methodology’ is.
Point 4: Reviewer 2

I have the impression that much of the preparatory work and choices that have been made in the successfully conducted projects remains implicit and not really reflected upon. The authors for example do not spell out how gaps in the literature have been identified and how that was translated into their empirical work, nor how the empirical research has contributed to reaching normative judgments. Even if the authors would argue that such reflection or explanation of tying normative and empirical work together is beyond the scope of the paper, their analysis remains somewhat unsatisfactory. Especially the projects named as an example on page 9 and 10, read more as summaries, than as reflections. Several aspects of the framework are named, but it isn't explained why for example vignettes have been used nor whether that has been a wise decision. Also, the choice for feminist theory, a hermeneutical approach or symbiotic ethics, remains unreflected, leaving the reader somewhat puzzled about what there is to learn from these examples. Overall I have the impression that the authors merely describe and summarize what has been done in their own projects, rather than explaining why and really reflecting upon their own choices and planning. I am certain that the authors have rich ideas about why certain choices have contributed to the success of these projects and I believe that there lies the largest potential for this paper. I surely agree with the authors that empirical projects can take several shapes, but how we know whether we have chosen the right shape, or what constitutes a good shape, should be spelled out when proposing such a framework. I am hoping that the authors are willing to add such reflections to this paper as it is a missed opportunity in its current form. These will most likely be helpful for readers of this paper, and may convince (the few) readers who are skeptical about empirical bioethics as a systematic approach in bioethics.

Response (p10)

We accept that it is a limitation of the paper that we have not explored in depth, nor critically analysed, the methodological choices described in the projects we used to illustrate the mapping, framing, shaping approach.

However, we would point out that these projects are explicitly, and only, described in order to illustrate the various ways that ‘mapping, framing and shaping’ can be expressed in a diverse range of projects, and in doing so show how our three phase approach works as an ‘umbrella’ structure, which helps us to specify the overarching structure of a project without dictating its contents (i.e. which specific review methods, empirical methods, bridging methodology or ethical theories are then used). If we were to focus on critically examining these projects – rather than using them as illustrations – the focus of the paper would be shifted away from our central point – which is that the mapping, framing and shaping structure provides a coherent way to characterise empirical bioethics whist permitting a whole range of different specific methodological choices within it.
We do, indeed, have plenty to say on this – too much for this paper - and we feel this kind of critical analysis would be best saved for a different paper that can focus on those issues.

We have added text throughout in response to other comments that clarify our aims, and we hope that these additions also serve to explain why we have not engaged critically with these projects. We have also added some specific text to manage expectations with regard to this.

Point 5: Reviewer 2

P3, L10, "In recent years" I agree that over the past few years much reflection has been paid to empirical bioethics, but the practice of it is already going on for several years, if not decades. I suggest to rephrase this.

Response (p3)

We agree, and have changed this to ‘For several decades’. We had wanted to avoid any hostages to fortune by being circumspect about this and avoiding any specific timeframes.

Point 6: Reviewer 2

P4, L20-21: "advantages to thinking about the overall shape of the research project in addition to its discrete parts". : Related to the main problem I see with the paper as outlined above, the aim is rather vague: what does thinking about the overall shape mean?

Response (p5)

Thank you for raising this. We agree that it could be clearer. We have added text throughout to explain more clearly what we mean, and changed our language to avoid confusion e.g. we no longer talk about the ‘overall shape’. In essence, by ‘overall shape’ we mean the project as a whole, from start to finish, rather than just the method of integrating the empirical and the normative. We hope that the changes make this clearer.

Point 7: Reviewer 2

P5, 16-24: With regard to the mapping: this is intuitive, but I wonder whether, or which aspect, is specifically important for empirical research: should a mapping of the field be done for any ethical issue, regardless of whether it is theoretical or empirical?
Response (p 7, endnote a)

Thank you for raising this. We have addressed this in an endnote. This paper is specifically concerned with empirical bioethics research, and mapping the field could certainly be useful in any kind of ethics research, but whether it is needed very much depends on the specific research being undertaken, and so we do not wish to make general ‘should’ statement here. We have, however, used the endnote to acknowledge the important question and point readers to the debate.

Point 8: Reviewer 2

P6, with regard to the framing: Could you clarify the meaning of framing? I has the connotation of persuasion or even manipulation. I don't think that is what you mean here, some clarification would be helpful

Response (p7, endnote b)

Thank you for highlighting this semantic ambiguity – unfortunately typical of the English language. We have added an endnote to this end. We experimented with including this in the main text, but it distracted from the flow of the argument.

Point 9: Reviewer 2

P8, L11-14," We therefore suspect that the framework might well have wide relevance and utility because, even if it is recognised and already intuitively practiced, our framework provides a way of articulating the research phases in a clear and recognisable form." I would be helpful to spell out what you consider the utility. Is the structure itself valuable or rather the reflection or delineation between phases that provides the utility?

Response (p5)

Thank you for pressing us on this. We have added additional explanation to clarify where we think the utility lies.