Reviewer’s report

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

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Reviewer: Karin Jongsma

Reviewer's report:

This paper outlines a framework for conducting empirical ethics projects, by drawing on an analogy with landscaping. The authors have an impressive amount of experience with empirical ethics research on which they draw in this paper. I think that such reflection upon how one conducts empirical ethics projects is interesting and valuable for example for people who plan to do their first empirical ethics projects or for those who want to juxtapose their own approaches to that commonly done in Bristol. The landscaping metaphor is original and draws attention to the similarities between empirical work and landscaping: for it to be successful, one does not only have to be willing to get their hands dirty in practical work, but the invisible work such as planning and making choices needs to be done carefully, before the practical work can start.

The paper summarizes several projects and experiences of the researchers, which underscores their expertise in this field. However, 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.

Some specific and minor points:

- 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.

- 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?

- 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?

- 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

- 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?

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

Unable to assess

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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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.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

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