Reviewer’s report

Title: The living dead? Perception of persons in the unresponsive wakefulness syndrome in Germany compared to the USA

Version: 0 Date: 07 Dec 2017

Reviewer: Luigi Trojano

Reviewer’s report:

The authors report the findings of an on-line survey investigating the perception of Unresponsive Wakefulness Syndrome (UWS) patients in a large German sample (N=919). Participants were presented with one story describing the condition of a person who after a car accident, was either alive, in UWS or dead, and thereafter were asked to rate the mental abilities of that person. The authors explored the effect of religiosity, of subjective knowledge and exposure to UWS patients, and of the medical background.

The authors also compared their findings with those collected in an US sample in a previous study in which the same stimuli were used to assess the perception of UWS.

The study has merit since it investigates a delicate issue that could be relevant for several ethical and health policy decisions in different countries. However, I believe that the manuscript has several weaknesses that preclude publication in its present form. Below I will summarize my major concerns.

1) The authors did not consider the potential effect of demographics (age, gender, educational level) on participants' responses. I believe that data should be analysed in this respect, as, for instance, gender might affect attitudes towards death and religiosity.

2) The authors devote many efforts to compare their own and the previous results from the US sample. The authors even choose parametric statistical analysis to keep the studies as similar as possible, notwithstanding the fact that parametric statistical analysis is not appropriate for some of the present data, not respecting normality assumption.

However no comparison is made on possible demographics differences between the two samples. In this case, not only age, gender, and educational level, but also socio-economics and cultural background matter. The reader has no means to establish whether differences between the responses in the two samples can be at least partially accounted for by differences in these variables. I acknowledge that the reader might be reassured by the fact that no significant difference was found on some responses between the two samples, but it is obvious that the responses differed in several crucial aspects.

In their discussion section the authors take into account that linguistic differences might have yielded differences in response patterns, but it would be important to underline that the different procedures used for performing the survey (on-line vs. paper and pencil) might have introduced
clearly divergent selection biases in the two studies, with a different composition of the two samples.

3) The authors interpret the differences between their own and the US study within a theoretical model postulating six dimensions characterizing different cultures. This part of the manuscript strongly relies on the assumption that the samples included in the two studies are highly representative of the population of the countries characterized by the theoretical model. The authors should make explicit this assumption and demonstrate its plausibility before adopting this peculiar theoretical model for interpreting their results.

In conclusion, I believe that the present study has merit and provides interesting results as far as the issue of the perception of (UWS) patients in a selected German sample is concerned. In this respect I would only suggest exploring the potential role of additional demographic factors in this sample. I believe that, instead, the authors need to tone down their emphasis on cross-cultural issues on the basis of available data.

I would encourage re-submission of the manuscript after major changes.

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.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
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