Engaging with the Primary Ethics Literature

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Two Kinds of Ethics Literature: Descriptive and Normative

**Descriptive:**
What empirical claims are being made about the technology? How do we know this to be true?

**Normative:**
How ought we to use the technology? What ought to be considered? Should we be persuaded that this is the right course of action?
Descriptive/Empirical Research

Collects data to describe actual ethical judgments, practices, and policies of health care organizations, patients and their families, and society.

Can be *quantitative* or *qualitative*
What do we mean by “qualitative research”?

- Empirical research
- Humans, documents, artifacts
- Descriptive or interpretive
- Any research paradigm
- Use qualitative techniques for sampling, data collection, analysis, interpretation

NOT: surveys, questionnaires
Challenge 1: Defining Topic

Technology in general  
Class of Technologies  
The Technology  
A specific technology for a specific condition  
The Condition  
Class of conditions  
Health & illness in general

Qualitative literature  
Clinical epidemiology & economic literature “PICO target”  
Qualitative literature
Original empirical studies relevant for ethics not always readily identifiable as empirical research in ethics. May be:

* published by a non-ethicist
* published in a non-ethics journal
* lack an explicit discussion of relevant ethical debates
* not indexed using ethics or ethics-related terms.

Ethics depends on social and cultural context and values, national and non-English language ethics databases are important.
Assessing Rigour

**Validity**
* Was the choice of participants explicit and comprehensive?
* Was data collection sufficiently comprehensive and detailed?
* Were the data analyzed appropriately and the findings corroborated adequately?

**Transferability**
* Does the study offer helpful theoretical conclusions?
* Does the study help me understand the context of my practice?
* Does the study help me understand the technology and its effects?

Normative Ethics Literature

Reasoned conclusions about how things **ought** to be (relevant concerns and courses of action), rather than empirically based descriptions of how things **are**.
Normative Ethics Literature


1. Does the article address a focused ethics question?
   a. Does the article address a clearly stated and focused ethical issue or problem?
   b. Is the issue important and why?
   c. Is justification for the importance presented?
   d. From whose perspective is importance claimed?
2. Are the arguments that support the conclusion of the article valid?

What is the quality of the ethical analysis and argument?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceptable appeals</th>
<th>Unacceptable appeals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tradition and current practice</td>
<td>Historic facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical principles</td>
<td>Majority opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General ethical theory</td>
<td>Permitted by law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casuistry</td>
<td>Mere opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective equilibrium</td>
<td>Biologic truths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional virtues</td>
<td>No right or wrong answer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. What are the conclusions of the paper’s ethical analysis and argument?

4. Will the results help in policy analysis and recommendation?
   a. Will the help be practical?
   b. Will the help be theoretic?
   c. How should the reader change his or her thinking, attitudes, practices, or policies?

* Score each item (0, 0.5, 1) and produce summary score

* No “quality threshold” proposed: 1 “low”? 4 “high”?
* Assessment based mainly on reporting
Developing a Checklist

Workshop on methodology for ethics in HTA (October 2013)
Edmonton, Canada and Köln, Germany
32 participants from HTA agencies in 10 countries

CHECKLIST

Internal: perspective, assumptions, premises, conclusions, connection between premises and conclusion, objections
External: transferability, implications, completeness, bias


THANK YOU!

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