The Many Methods of Medical Ethics Research

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METHODS in MEDICAL ETHICS

Second Edition

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There are many methods...
Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.
Most general classification

- Normative ethics
- Meta-ethics
- Descriptive ethics
The primacy of the normative
Theoretical Methods

- Philosophical
- Theological
- Casuistic
- Legal – quasi-normative
- Historical -- descriptive/interpretive
- Literary -- interpretive
Empirical Methods

- Qualitative
  - Focus groups
  - Interviews
  - Ethnographic
  - Participant-observer

- Quantitative
  - Surveys
  - Pre-existing data bases
  - Psychological instruments
  - Economic/ decision science
  - Other quantifiable data
  - Cross-sectional vs. prospective vs. experimental
Field or discipline?

- **Field** – subject of scholarly inquiry
- **Discipline** –
  - A department of knowledge
  - A community of scholars
  - Common
    - Training
    - Methods/ modes of inquiry
    - Standards of excellence
    - Vocabulary
    - Boundaries
Multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary?
Theoretical arguments

- Structure
- Assumptions
- Definitions
- Internal consistency
- Factual correctness
- Firm grasp of the literature
- Counter-arguments
Structure

• **Beginning:**
  – thesis

• **Middle:**
  – argument

• **End:**
  – conclusion
Assumptions

• Be up front!
• Ethical framework
• Better to state even if others disagree
Definitions

- Define terms clearly
- “terms of art”
- New definitions and distinctions
- All definitions restrict
Internal consistency

• Non-contradiction
  – Aristotle *Metaphysics* γ.4
• Coherentist theories of truth
• Rawlsian reflective equilibrium
Factual correctness

- Good ethics depends on sound facts
- Facts play a role in normative arguments
Grasp the literature

- *Comprehensive* and *firm*
- Not the number of citations!
- Read more than the abstract
- Cite page numbers in books
Counter-arguments

• How will skeptics respond?
• How will I respond to the skeptics?
Ethics and Evidence

• Good evidence needs sound facts
• Anything more?
Empirical Methods

• Qualitative
  – Focus groups
  – Interviews
  – Ethnographic
  – Participant-observer

• Quantitative
  – Surveys
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  – Cross-sectional vs. prospective vs. experimental
When Are Qualitative Studies Most Useful?

- Need for in-depth knowledge
- So little understanding one does not even know where to begin
- To validate quantitative instruments (cognitive pre-testing)
- Disadvantages
  - Time-consuming
  - Lack of generalizability
When are cross-sectional studies useful?

• To test facts that are normatively significant
• To assess levels of agreement or disagreement
• To assess knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors
• To test for associations, generate testable hypotheses
When are experimental methods useful in empirical research in medical ethics?

- Education
- Program implementation
- Testing an outcome predicted by theory
  - Philosophical
  - Behavioral
  - Economic
  - Neurological
Kinds of trials

- Randomized controlled trial
- Non-randomized
- Uncontrolled
- Natural experiments
"It's a government funded study to find out how many wrongs make a right."
What role can evidence play? The limits and the promise

• Naturalistic fallacy (is/ought distinction)
• Facts do figure in normative arguments:
  – If x is true, one ought (not) to do y.
• Forms of the naturalistic fallacy:
  – Historicist
  – Populist
  – Authoritative
  – Biological
What role can evidence play?

• Surveys
  – Assess agreement
  – Measure frequency of behaviors
• Assess slippery slope arguments
• Policy experiments
• Describe how positions have come about
  – History
  – Statistical associations
What role can evidence play?

- Test falsifiable assumptions in bioethical arguments
- Clarify bioethical questions
- Establish factual premises in bioethical arguments
- Case reports
  - Casuistry
- Sociological & anthropological background
- Experimental moral psychology
Conclusions

• Evidence plays a key role
• Empirical research about clinical ethics can help
• Ethics is never based on evidence alone
SCHOLA NATURALIS PHILOSOPHIAE