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2010 : January 2010 - New Hot Papers : Alexander A. Kon on Empirical Research in Bioethics

## new hot papers - 2010

### January 2010



**Alexander A. Kon talks with *ScienceWatch.com* and answers a few questions about this month's New Hot Paper in the field of Social Sciences, general.**



**Article Title: The Role of Empirical Research in Bioethics**

Authors: **Kon, AA**

Journal: AM J BIOETH

Volume: 9

Issue: 6-7

Page: 59-65

Year: 2009

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**SW: Why do you think your paper is highly cited? Does it describe a new discovery, methodology, or synthesis of knowledge?**

This paper provides a novel framework for understanding how empirical research can inform bioethics. In the past, many have argued that empirical work cannot inform normative ethics, however in "The role of empirical research in bioethics" I demonstrate not only how such research can impact normative ethics, but also provide concrete examples of the significant impact empirical research has had on normative ethics. This work presents a novel synthesis of knowledge.

**SW: Would you summarize the significance of your paper in layman's terms?**

Bioethicists have argued for many years whether doing research could help shape what is termed normative ethics. Normative ethics can be thought of as "what we ought to do." For example, we ought to provide the highest quality care we can to our patients, we ought to respect the patient's right to make one's own healthcare decisions, we ought to be honest with patients, these are all examples of normative ethics. In contrast, research can only tell us "what is."

For example, research can tell us whether physicians provide the highest quality care they can to their patients, whether healthcare providers indeed respect patients' rights

*"This work supports the assertion that we need improved funding for bioethics research."*

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to make their own healthcare decisions, and whether providers are honest with their patients. Therefore, many have argued that empirical research cannot inform normative ethics—or in bioethics terminology, the "is" cannot inform the "ought."

In this paper, I present a four-tiered framework to understanding the roll of empirical research in bioethics: "Lay of the Land" research, in which investigators explore the current state of affairs; "Ideal versus Reality" studies, in which researchers test whether we live up to our ideals as determined by normative ethics; "Improving Care" research, in which investigators test new approaches to bring reality closer to our ideas; and finally "Changing Ethical Norms" articles, in which ethicists use previously published studies to demonstrate that our normative ethics should be changed based on empirical findings.

This work brings to rest the long-standing debate by clarifying how the "is" can inform the "ought," and by articulating changes in our ethical norms that have occurred due to empirical research results.

**SW: How did you become involved in this research, and were there any problems along the way?**

I have been involved with both empirical research in bioethics and normative ethics for some time, therefore this work flowed naturally from my previous work. There were many problems in attempting to construct a robust and accurate system of categorization, and in detailing the intricacies of how exactly empirical work can inform normative ethics.

**SW: Where do you see your research leading in the future?**

I have several research interests focusing primarily on decision-making in the care of critically ill children and in informed permission and assent for research involving children.

**SW: Do you foresee any social or political implications for your research?**

Yes. This work supports the assertion that we need improved funding for bioethics research.

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KEYWORDS: BIOETHICS; CLINICAL; EMPIRICAL RESEARCH; ETHICAL ANALYSIS; ETHICAL THEORY; ETHICS; PRINCIPLE-BASED ETHICS; SHARED DECISION-MAKING; INTENSIVE-CARE-UNIT; OF-LIFE CARE; INTERNATIONAL CONSENSUS CONFERENCE; RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED-TRIAL; INFORMED-CONSENT; FAMILY-MEMBERS; RACIAL DISPARITIES; ETHNIC Disparities.

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