



Ives, J. C. S., Birchley, G., & Huxtable, R. (2020). Implementation Science and Bioethics: Lesson from European Empirical Bioethics Research? *American Journal of Bioethics*, 80-82 .
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2020.1730518>

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[10.1080/15265161.2020.1730518](https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2020.1730518)

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Implementation Science and Bioethics: Lessons from European Empirical Bioethics Research?

We welcome this paper from Sisk et al, which argues that principles of implementation science ought to be incorporated into ethics research. We view this work as closely connected to the large literature on empirical bioethics coming out of Europe (and elsewhere), which has made similar points about the need to ensure, when conducting research and forming recommendations, that those recommendations are feasible (Ives et al, 2017; Huxtable & Ives, 2019,). Empirical bioethics seems to have arisen, at least in part, as a response to what Hedgcock (2004) refers to as the ‘social science critique’ of a bioethics dominated by abstract philosophical approaches, and which is therefore ill-suited to the task of formulating real world solutions to real world problems. The way that we, and others, have responded to this challenge has been to explore methodologies that integrate empirical and ethical analysis, in a way that “respects the sound empirical point that facts and values are not distinct in practice, but that also does not fall foul of the is/ought problem as defined in philosophical terms.” (Ives and Draper, 2010. p254). Whilst the focus has been very much on engaging with ‘practical ought questions’ (Dunn et al, 2012), most work has been concerned with questions of epistemology, justification, and research methodology (Ives et al, 2019).

In their paper, Sisk et al. start from a similar premise in claiming that “when we draw conclusions in the realm of ethics, we are actually making choices regarding actions. Normative claims that are not (or cannot) be put into practice might have aspirational value, but these norms fail to fulfil the essential function of ethics if they do not eventually lead to ethical actions.” (Sisk et al 2020, px). This mirrors the social science critique insofar as it frames as problematic any ethics research which studies theoretical problems and offers theoretical solutions, without paying attention to the social worlds in which ethical decision-making actually takes place. They also, however, seem to take an extra step in saying that good and effective ethics research cannot only be about drawing conclusions that are relevant, feasible, and have real world purchase (goals embraced by European empirical bioethics), but that properly functioning ethics research must bring about change. They thus take their thinking in a different direction and, as their title suggests, are less concerned with avoiding the move from ‘is’ to ‘ought’, and more with facilitating the move from ‘ought’ to ‘is’. The way to manage this is to build implementation science into ethics research.

Whilst broadly supportive of any move to make ethics research more practical and relevant – as we hope is evident from our previous work in this area – we have a few concerns about the way that Sisk et al make their proposal. First, their account (as written) appears inattentive to some important issues and, second, there are potentially problematic implications of their account. We will begin with the latter, as this is easier to explain, and this leads into the former, which we feel is more substantive.

Sisk et al’s paper appears to take for granted a framing of ‘bioethics’ as a particular form of philosophical inquiry, and this framing of bioethics is then problematised and used as the jumping-off point from which they offer their proposal. This framing is evident in the way the authors describe what can be expected of an ethicist, how an ethicist should work, and in their implicit claims about the traditional role of the ethicists:

“Ethicists cannot be expected to master every role necessary for the implementation of specific norms. However, it should be the responsibility of ethicists to help form and participate in multidisciplinary, collaborative teams with others who possess the necessary content knowledge, skillsets, experiences, and political connections within the relevant inner and outer settings to facilitate the success of an intervention. Doing so is outside the traditional role of ethicists, but it is imperative if ethicists hope to fulfil the overarching goal of ethics – supporting ethical practice in the real world.” (px)

Here, the authors portray a version of bioethics that would be difficult to recognise in Europe, where bioethics is generally viewed as an interdisciplinary field. As Ives (2014) has noted elsewhere:

“Bioethics has (arguably) always been an interdisciplinary field, and the rise of ‘empirical’ (bio)ethics need not be seen as an attempt to give a new name to the longstanding practice of interdisciplinary collaboration (as some have suggested), but can perhaps best be understood as a substantive attempt to engage with the nature of that interdisciplinarity and to articulate the relationship between the many different disciplines (some of them empirical) that contribute to the field.” (p302).

That said, this account also positions the philosophical ethicist as the person who determines the correct answer and then seeks help from other disciplines in order to ensure that their answer is implemented. This mirrors the ‘handmaiden’ problem, perhaps most clearly articulated by Erica Haimes (2002; cf Hedgcock 2004), which holds as highly problematic a research relationship where other disciplines are subservient to their philosophical master. The account of bioethics implied by Sisk et al, and the solution offered, fails to recognise the already interdisciplinary nature of bioethics and reinforces a problematic handmaiden relationship. It also suggests that any ethics researcher must also be an activist – someone who aims from the outset to bring about change in the world. This is potentially a limited view of what it is to be a bioethicist and, at the very least, the relationship between bioethics and activism is more complex than is acknowledged (Draper et al, 2019)

It remains, of course, an open question about what kind of bioethics is best, but what we find troubling is the evident lack of engagement with this issue, especially given the ink that has been spilled on it. Our first concern is that this is indicative of a relatively myopic engagement with bioethics outside of the US (not by any means limited to these authors) which may both lead to much work – and time – being spent needlessly rehashing debates, not to mention sowing division by moulding promising research from US bioethics as separate and parallel to, rather than iterative with, progress in Europe.

Our more substantive concern follows from the implicit framing of bioethics above, which casts the philosophical bioethicist as the decision-maker who draws on the expertise of others to ensure that their conclusions are implemented. The idea seems to be that, by working with implementation sciences from the outset, ethicists can ensure that the conclusions they draw will be implemented and have an effect in practice. This, however, appears to ignore the vital question of how we determine which conclusions ought to be implemented. Facilitating the move from ‘ought’ to ‘is’ is important, but it is only warranted once we have established a justified ‘ought’, and one potential danger of building implementation science into the fabric of ethics research is that we become very good at effecting change but risk, in so doing, making unjustified compromises in decisions about what the change ought to be. It is precisely this risk that the European empirical bioethics literature has been focussing on – developing methodologies (both method and epistemology) that allow us to consult with others, consider the practical aspects of ethical decisions, entertain compromise, take into account the needs of policy, and still produce ethically justifiable and defensible conclusions that we can feel confident ought to be implemented.

What we have arguably paid insufficient attention to in our work is how to bring about that change – assuming simply that if we conduct a form of research that is theoretically rigorous, attentive to the lived reality of stakeholders, and attentive to the practical demands of policy, that will be enough. Sisk et al. challenge us to go further. We offer a different kind of challenge in return. We see a danger in focussing on implementation and paying insufficient attention to justification – and we risk the tail of impact wagging the dog of scholarship.

We broadly welcome Sisk et al's contribution because, done well, we are convinced that the inclusion of implementation science could bring significant benefits to bioethics. The challenge to us all is to think carefully about how to do it well. For our part, we see implementation science as being one other discipline to bring into the fold of our research, with a view to thinking more carefully and systematically about how we develop our conclusions and form them in a way that is amenable to impact. At the same time, however, we must remain humble and accept that our conclusions might be wrong – and therefore think twice before assuming our conclusions are the correct ones to drive change *before* we try to bring it about. We must also be attentive to the risks of including mechanisms to achieve impact into ethics research that might change the nature of the normative conclusion we draw, so that we do not move too quickly into facilitating an 'is' without a properly justified 'ought'.

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Sisk et al (2020) – add reference when known