Conceptualising Ethical Issues in the Conduct of Research: Results from a Critical and Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract:

This article is interested in the ways in which authors from various fields conceptualise the ethical issues arising in the conduct of research. We reviewed critically and systematically the literature concerning the ethics of conducting research in order to engage in a reflection about the vocabulary and conceptual categories used in the publications reviewed. To understand better how the ethical issues involved in conducting research are conceptualised in the publications reviewed, we 1) established an inventory of the conceptualisations reviewed, and 2) we critically assessed them. We found that the publications reviewed mostly showed examples of descriptive ethics, in that most authors describe ethical issues without reflecting much on them, which could be explained both by 1) a lack of ethical education in research contexts, and 2) by the fact that we do not know what researchers know (or do not) about ethical issues. Additionally, the definitions identified in the publications are scarce and at times imprecise, but this seems more to point out the ethics' vocabulary difficulties in certain contexts. Further, very few authors offer proper conceptualisations of the ethical issues arising in conducting research. When dealing with vast arrays of ethical issues to conceptualise, perhaps one ought to remember that some typologies already exist that could guide further reflection and help understand other realities for which the current ethical vocabulary may be lacking. As for the typologies we uncovered, like that of Bruhn et al. (2002) and Sieber (2004), we believe their combination, both with other well-developed typologies and critical reflection, could help support better ethical practice in conducting research.

Keywords:

Ethical issues, conceptualisation, research ethics, ethical typologies, literature review, ethical normative grounds.

Conflicts of Interest:

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Acknowledgement:

1. Introduction

> *A certain kind of permission is given to live differently, to conceptualise and to act according to a new conceptualisation*. (Butler 2007)

Contemporary academic settings around the world are marked by a growing presence of ethical guidelines, committees and imperatives that influence both the conduct of research (i.e., research ethics) and the behaviour of researchers (i.e., scientific integrity or responsible conduct of research). For researchers whose projects involve the participation of human beings or animals, the process of obtaining research ethics approval has almost certainly required them to deal with ethical issues related to, amongst others, the recruitment of research participants (e.g., issues of informed consent, justice and inclusion/exclusion of certain groups) and the management of research findings (e.g., protecting sensitive data). But researchers, regardless of discipline or field of study, also are increasingly having to address ethical issues related to the broader research process and their stance as researchers. These can relate to the management of conflicts of interest (e.g., personal, financial, institutional), the way they and their teams analyse data (e.g., managing researcher bias, choice of methods, rigour of analysis) or how they share research results (e.g., dissemination and accessibility of results, determination of authorship, management of participant or partner expectations) (CRSH, CRSNG & IRSH

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2018; FRQ 2014; Steneck 2004). The conduct of research raises a diversity of ethical issues that will vary in nature, scope and severity for the various actors involved (e.g., students, researchers, participants, funders, university administrators), and will depend in part on the type of research conducted (e.g., empirical, conceptual). Yet, while there is increasing and even widespread recognition by the research community (e.g., researchers, institutions, funders) of the importance of ethics in research (i.e., research ethics and scientific integrity) and the necessity to attend to and address ethical issues before they become problematic, there is a notable lack of clarity about what actually constitutes "ethical issues" or how they are understood by the various stakeholders involved.

In this article, we follow Swisher et al. (2005) and define an "ethical issue" as involving any situation that may compromise, in whole or in part, the respect of at least one value considered legitimate and desirable (Swisher et al. 2005). This definition was chosen because it covers a broad spectrum of problematic ethical realities. Rather than sticking, for example, to the notion of an ethical dilemma (i.e., when actors are faced with a choice between two equally good/bad decisions or situations), which is frequently discussed in the bioethics literature (Goulet and Drolet 2018), it seemed more judicious to include all situations that may be ethically problematic when a researcher or research team conducts a study. We use the word "research" in its broadest sense and without disciplinary limits, that is, the "investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories or laws" (Mish 2014).

Our aim, here, is to deploy an ethical lens to better understand how researchers from various academic fields conceptualise, in the academic literature, the multiple ethical issues that arise in the conduct of research (Bruhn et al. 2002; Siber 2004). What are these issues, specifically? Do they have to do with research ethics, or scientific integrity, or both? And are "issues" the same as "challenges," "problems" or "dilemmas"? To our knowledge, no article has critically reviewed and analysed the ways in which the ethical issues encountered in research are conceptualised in the academic literature. This article aims to contribute by offering a theoretical and critical reflection on the vocabulary and conceptual categories used in contemporary documents to discuss the ethical issues raised by the conduct of research.

To answer the question *How are the ethical issues involved in conducting research conceptualised in the literature?*, it is necessary to address a set of sub-questions related to the description of the conceptualisation and its critical appraisal. What vocabulary is used? Is the concept of ethical issue (or its synonyms) clearly defined? Are the issues discussed classified according to certain categories? If so: What are the typologies of ethical issues identified in the documents? Are the definitions offered adequate? What is the relevance, accuracy and quality of the concepts, categories and typologies used in the literature? Do these concepts or categories of ethical issues adequately describe the phenomena they claim to encompass? In short, this study had two objectives: 1) to establish an inventory of conceptualisations of ethical issues in research, and 2) to critically examine these conceptualisations.

Our critical analysis can be understood to be at the intersection of applied ethics (specifically research ethics) and a subcategory of normative philosophical ethics known as "non-ideal" theory. We refer in particular to John Rawls's distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory: the "ideal part presents a conception of a just society that we are to achieve if we can. Existing institutions are to be judged in the light of this conception" (Rawls 1971), while "non-ideal theory asks how this long-term goal might be achieved, or worked toward, usually in gradual steps. It looks for courses of action that are morally permissible and politically possible as well as likely to be effective" (Rawls 1999). More recently, Charles W. Mills (2005) emphasised how rather than starting from abstraction, non-ideal theory is less preoccupied with the defence of strong normative ideals, duties, principles or obligations, and seeks instead to identify, based on reality and the diversity of practical issues, strategies that are likely to achieve such ideals. In other words, non-ideal theory can be understood to be more of a bottom-up ethical approach rather than top-down; as John Simmons puts it, "where ideal theory dictates the objective, non-ideal theory dictates the route to that objective" (2013). Drawing insights from the field of applied research ethics and the issues to which it pertains, this article aims to better name, conceptualise and address the issues experienced in practice by researchers across diverse fields or disciplines. In this regard, we situate this critical conceptualisation process in an applied ethics frame anchored in a non-ideal perspective.

Building on a previous systematic review of the literature in the field of bioethics (Goulet and Drolet 2018), the premise behind the present study is that conceptualisations of ethical issues are probably marginal, at best. Further, a low degree of conceptualisation can arguably hinder the practical, problem-solving aims of applied ethics (e.g., research ethics, professional ethics) because conceptual gaps limit the possibility, among the actors and organisations concerned, to identify the issues and develop relevant intervention strategies that are likely to correspond. Conversely, access to better conceptual or theoretical tools have the potential to increase these problem-solving abilities. This premise is based on the fundamental idea that whatever the nature or form of the ethical issues experienced in practice (or the stakeholders involved), the more precise and adequate the ethical vocabulary that people use to name these issues, the better able they will be to act and address these issues. As H. Tristram Engelhardt stated, "Ideas have a life and power of their own. An idea can shape or reshape the ways in which we understand and experience reality. Encountering a fruitful idea, we say, Ah-ha! and see the world anew and cannot imagine it otherwise" (Engelhardt 1988). Indeed, concepts can support a better perception of the reality of which ethical issues are a part, hence our willingness to identify and criticise

the conceptualisation of ethical issues in research to better support the responsible conduct of research. If we are to move beyond a top-down normative view of ethics and instead empower researchers and organisations (e.g., research centres, institutions, funders) to be able to identify ethical issues and deploy effective means to correct or even remedy ethically problematic situations, then we all need to have a clear conceptualisation of what are "ethical issues".

2. Methods

To pursue the research objectives and answer the above-mentioned questions, we conducted a systematic and critical review of the interdisciplinary literature. This review is based on the method proposed by McCullough, Coverdale and Chervenak (2004, 2007), which was selected for this study because it was specifically developed for applied ethics research that is both descriptive and critical. Through its four steps, this method allows the identification of the normative, axiological, and epistemological foundations of the ethical concepts that are documented, along with the subsequent contribution of a critical perspective (McCullough et al. 2007). Figure 1 presents the four steps of this method. The following paragraphs describe their application in the context of this study.

Step 1. *Identify question(s) for the literature review*.

Three specific research questions were targeted based on the objectives of the research: (i) *What are the conceptualisations of ethical issues used by the authors and how are they defined?* (ii) *What are the normative grounds used by the authors in the publications?* (iii) *What typologies of ethical issues are put forward?*

Step 2. *Review literature in databases based on selected relevant keywords*.

To answer the questions that prompted the review, certain keywords (in both English and French) were used to target the appropriate publications in the databases consulted and the search engines used. Table 1 presents the keywords that were used and combined in a variety of ways, following to five categories.

Table 1. *Keywords used to find relevant documents both in English and in French*

Words related to "issue"		Words related to "ethics"		Words related to "typology"		Words related to "research subject"	
Enjeu*	Challenge*	Éthique*	Ethic*	Catégorie*	Class*	Candidat*	Candidate*
Défi*	Difficult*	Moral*	Ethical Moral*	Classe*	Classification*	Cobaye*	Participant*
Difficulté*	Dilemma*			Classification*	Categor*	Participant*	Patient*
Dilemme*	Discomfort			Espèce*	Genre	Patient*	Subject*
Détresse*	Distress*			Famille*	Famil*	Sujet*	
Problèm*	Issue*			Genre* Taxonomie*	Species		
Malaise*	Problem*	**Words related to "research"**		Typologie*	Type*		
Tension*	Tension*			Type*	Typolog*		
Trouble*	Trouble*	Enquête	Research		Taxonom*		
		Étude Recherche	Investigation				
			Study				

* We have chosen to use the asterisk in the keywords because it is a common generic wildcard character that broadens the search by finding similar words with the same root or starting with the same letters.

To be included, a publication had to be written in English or in French, answer at least one of the research questions, and be accessible in paper or in electronic format (without subscription or additional fees). In order to retain as many relevant publications as possible and to ensure completeness of the review, the publication date was not an exclusion factor and all relevant texts published up to 2018 were retained. Finally, we also opted to include texts from the grey literature (personal testimonials, editorials, book chapters, etc.). Therefore, we did not limit ourselves only to peer-reviewed articles.

Table 2. *Number of documents found for each database, following the readings of the titles*

Databases	Publications
Academic Search Complete	13
Cairn.info	2
CambridgeCore	4
Canadian Periodical Index	4
CINHAL	6
eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)	2
Érudit	27
Eureka	2
Francis	5
Google Scholar	15
JSTOR arts & sciences	5

Medline	10
Open Edition Freenium	3
Periodicals Archive Online	2
Persée	3
Philosopher's Index	12
Project Muse	2
PsychINFO	9
Religion and Philosophy Collection	14
REPÈRE	3
ScienceDirect	3
Scopus	8
Springer	2
Taylor and Francis	18
Total	**168**

Preliminary analytic criteria were deployed early in the review of the databases, as we aimed to target publications with titles that would be encompassed by the keywords. Even though the results may sometimes have been in the thousands for each database visited, we believed early exclusionary criteria based on the titles of the publications could prove efficient to target the most relevant texts. Further screening processes were employed once we reached 167 publications retained based on their titles. Figure 2 summarises the steps used to more precisely screen the literature and the exclusion criteria we set out for the final sample.

Step 3. *Extract and summarise date from selected documents*.

The reading and analysis of the selected publications made it possible to answer the questions of the review. First, a data extraction form was created for the study (see Table 3). This form was filled out for each of the articles selected, making it possible to compile precise and exhaustive answers to the research questions. Secondly, a summary table was designed using an Excel spreadsheet to compile these results and generate an overview of the conceptualisations provided by the publications. These two strategies made it possible to rigorously target how the ethical issues were discussed in the literature and the way in which they were conceptualised. The results section presents the answers to the research questions.

Table 3. Data Extraction Sheet

Reference
Aim of the document
Type of document
Methods
Ethical issues identified
Who lives the ethical issues identified?
Concepts of ethical issues (name and describe them)
Theoretical or normative grounds
Typologies identified

Step 4. *Critically analyse the conceptualisations identified*

In accordance with the research objectives and following a thorough reading and analysis of the literature, a critical reflection was deployed. This reflection dealt in particular with the degree and quality of conceptualisation present in the selected documents. It is intended to be constructive, in that its aim is to support the development of ethical resources that can enable researchers and organisations to more easily identify ethical issues and manage them appropriately. This critical reflection is presented in detail in the discussion section below.

3. Results

In this section, we are first interested in describing the bibliometrics of the publications reviewed. We then present answers to the research questions.

3.1. Describing the texts reviewed

Sixty-seven (n=67) publications were deemed relevant to answer at least one of the research questions, namely: (*i*) *What are the concepts of ethical issues used by the authors and how are they defined?* (*ii*) *What are the normative grounds used by the authors?* (*iii*) *What typologies of ethical issues are put forward?*

As illustrated by Figure 3, the number of publications discussing the ethical issues of conducting research has been growing steadily since 1993. Further, the last three years have seen an increase in the number of publications on the subject. In addition, nearly half of the corpus (n=33) is made up of texts published in the last eight years, from 2011 to the present.

Nearly half of the publications deal with research in general, while the other half of the corpus addresses ethical issues related to specific areas of research (see Figure 4). More specifically, publications that deal with ethical issues that are not specific to a particular discipline or field of research address themes such as: research involving children, research using technology or social networks, or collaborative research, to name just a few examples.

As Figure 5 indicates, there have been few empirical studies on the ethical issues raised by the conduct of research. As well, many of the publications (n=15) in the corpus correspond to testimonials, opinion pieces or editorials, which is why the word "publication" has been preferred to "article".

Finally, Table 2 illustrates that 85% (n= 57) of the publications reviewed were written in English.

Table 4. *Number of publications by language*

Language	Number	%
English	57	85
French	10	15
Total	67	100

3.2. What are the concepts and definitions used by the authors?

Different concepts are used in the literature to refer to ethically problematic situations. As shown in Table 4, eleven (n=11) concepts were identified to describe these situations. The two concepts that were used most often are "ethical issue" and "dilemma", while the three concepts that were used the least often were "ethics failure", "ethical questioning" and "moral conflict".

Table 5. *Concepts used by authors by their frequency of occurrence*

Concepts	Authors	Number
Ethical issue	Banister, Birchley, Côté, Colnerund, Eide, Goodrich, Holian, Jennings, Kellehear, Lee, Lerville, Locke, Madhan, Molyneux, Mondain, Novelskaite, Orb, Parr, Resnik, Scott-Jones, White, Yee, Yip.	24
Dilemma	Balk, Colnerund, Davidson, Erzinclioglu, Fraser, Gringer, Henderson, Jarvis, Lerville, Locke, Lynoe, Mortari, Aarsand, Resnik, Tatebe, Wasamba, Yee.	17
Ethical problem	Colnerund, Giorgini, Hansson, Kellehear, Lomas-Scott, Molyneux, Mortari, Sieber, Swazey.	9
Risk	Banh, Colnerund, Kimmelman, Lerville, Sheperd.	5
Ethical concern	Hunter, Neves, Sheperd, Tatebe.	4
Ethical challenge	Jarvis, Aarsand, Resnik, Thompson	4
Injustice	Alexander, Mondain, Morelle	3
Misconduct	Al-Hidabi, Swazey	2
Ethics failure	Bruhn	1
Ethical quetioning	Laplante	1
Moral conflict	Merrit	1

We identified four (n=4) documents that provided a definition of the concept of "ethical issue", either by the authors themselves or by referring to a definition proposed by other authors. Thus, the vast majority of publications (n=63) do not explicitly define the concept of ethical issue that they use to designate the ethical issues they deal with. Although the review identified the concept of "ethical issue" as the one with the greatest presence in the publications (n=24), it should be noted that this concept was never defined. Moreover, several publications simultaneously mobilised different concepts without defining or distinguishing them

(see Table 5), which suggests that they were being used interchangeably. Table 6 outlines the four concepts of ethical issues that are defined in the publications in our sample.

Table 6. *Identified definition of ethical concepts*

Issue Concepts	Definitions
Ethics Failure	"Ethics failure can be defined as any act that results in harm to others. One element which is essential to ethics failure is intentionality; the harmful act must generally be done willfully" (Bruhn et al. 2002: 476).
Ethical problem	"We loosely defined an ethical problem as 'a problem or situation that requires a person or organization to choose between alternatives requiring ethical analysis', as opposed to a problem where it is clear what should be done, but a practical solution is needed" (Molyneux et al. 2016: 72).
Ethical Dilemma	"Ethical dilemma appears when a problematic situation arises where there are two opposite solutions: these are the 'horns' of the dilemma. One could almost say this is when a researcher gets 'stuck', where deep reflection is required" (Mortari and Harcourt 2012: 236).
Conflict of Interest	"Lo and Field define a conflict of interest as "existing when an individual or institution has a secondary interest (e.g., an ownership interest in a start-up biotechnology company) that creates a risk of undue influence on decisions or actions affecting a primary interest (e.g., the conduct of objective and trustworthy medical research)" (Williams-Jones et al. 2013: 14).

3.3. What normative grounds do the authors use?

The review made it possible to identify certain theoretical or normative grounds referred to in certain publications, which point to presuppositions, theories or approaches relating to criteria of justice and goodness and their evaluation. These normative grounds are generally named directly by the authors, or are easily identifiable by the vocabulary used, and underlie the authors' conceptualisation or reflection on the ethical issues they address in their texts. Few publications fall into this category, with only 11 addressing this aspect (16% of the sample). Six different normative grounds are mobilised by authors.

The most common normative ground used by authors (n=6 publications) involved references to cultural or ethical relativism. Although they are not equivalent, these types of relativism were used in a very similar way, namely to evoke the idea that values or ethical standards are difficult to evaluate objectively and to describe problematic situations related to them in the context of research with participants from other cultures (Bouffard 2000; Jarvis 2017; Mondain 2009; Morelle 2009; Resnik 2016; Wasamba 2009). These publications suggested, for example, a need for greater recognition of the place of individuals within their community or the determining role of cultural contexts in the production of normative meanings.

Three publications referred to the ethics of care. Laplante (2005) draws on this current by emphasising the importance for a researcher in the field of education to create and maintain rich and emancipatory human relationships with the people with whom she interacts. For their part, Mortari and Harcourt (2012) argue that ethical "sensitivity" in research should be encouraged. In so doing, they contrast an ethics of care with an ethics of justice. According to these authors, the latter is essentially an ethic of principles, codes and rules that are too disembodied, while the former is better able to promote concern for others in concrete and particular situations. The third publication (Zgaga 2018) referring to an ethics of care also mentioned Kantian ethics and utilitarianism, summarising the orientations of these major ethical currents from the view point of researchers and research ethics committees. Zgaga argues that the appearance of incompatibility between the three major currents would have led ethics committees to avoid these tensions by reducing ethics to a procedural matter. Thus, he fears that ethical concerns in research have become a matter of "legality" instead of "legitimacy", as they should be. Contrary to the idea that ethics is only about compliance with the law, Zgaga argues that restoring a dialogue between these major ethical streams is possible and necessary within academia in order to generate genuine ethical reflections.

Two publications were grounded on a critical feminist approach (Boutin-Ganache 2007; Degrave 2014). These theoretical grounds are mainly in the field of epistemology and are drawn upon either to better recognise power relations, the social position of researchers (gender, race, social class, etc.) and the risks associated with the abstract claim to neutrality in the production of research knowledge (Degrave 2014), or to highlight the fundamental relational dimension of ethical concerns in research which would be ignored in a principalist or Kantian-type approach (Boutin-Ganache 2007).

Finally, one publication (Jarvis 2017) used a virtue ethics approach. Jarvis argues that virtue, and in particular Aristotelian phronesis (practical wisdom, prudence or sagacity), should be cultivated in the field of international research. Due to the fact that the major traditional ethical principles are likely to be interpreted in very different or even contradictory ways, an approach grounded in phronesis could help researchers better navigate in the varied cultural contexts where ethical issues emerge. The author points out that phronesis – which is both a cognitive and affective virtue – involves knowing how to balance the "instrumental" and the "rational", and can thus give wisdom and judgement a practical and ethical dimension (Jarvis 2017). This virtue would therefore aim at developing action-oriented wisdom, on the part of researchers, that takes into account the contingencies of the world and is based on knowledge of particular facts.

3.4. What typologies can be identified in the literature?

A typology consists of a systematic classification system of different types, constructed according to the phenomena it seeks to record about a complex reality (de Villers 2009; Mish 2014). In this case, the typologies aimed to classify, distinguish, and describe the types of ethical issues according to their specific characteristics in order to facilitate understanding, analysis, and identification. Our systematic literature review made it possible to identify two publications proposing typologies of ethical issues in research.

The first is a typology of ethics failure in academia. Bruhn (2002) proposes a typology that aims to situate ethical failures (see Table 4) on two continuous axes, namely the origin of the failure (x) and the seriousness of the failure (y). The x-axis, which is the origin of ethical failure, is a continuum from individual failure to organisational failure. The y axis designates the seriousness of the ethical failure and is a continuum from minor to serious failure. The degree of seriousness of the failure is determined by answering the following three questions: "(1) whether this was a first offense or a pattern of behavior, (2) the type of offense and (3) the impact or consequences of the offense, namely, does it affect one or a few persons or an entire organization or institution" (Bruhn 2002: 477).

The second typology is a "brief taxonomy of ERORE (empirical research on research ethics) topics" (Sieber 2004: 399–400). Sieber starts from the observation that the ethical principles and rules guiding research do not necessarily solve the ethical issues faced by researchers in the field. As such, he believes that empirical research can help to better understand and resolve these problems (Sieber 2004). Sieber thus proposes a very detailed taxonomy of ethical topics, made up of five main categories and 21 subcategories that may involve issues and serve as a guide for researchers in future empirical investigations.

Communication Between Researcher and Participant	Acquisition and Use of Data	External Influences on Research	Risk and Benefit	Theory, Method, and Design
Informed consent	Privacy	Government regulations	Risk, wrong, and harm	Epistemology
Deception	Confidentiality	Institutional review boards (IRBs)	Benefit and promise of research	Validity
Cultural sensitivity	Uses of data, obligation to publish, data sharing, and dissemination	Questionable, taboo, and controversial topics of research	Risk–benefit assessment	Modeling
Relationships as a source of data		Scientific integrity and responsibility		Equitable treatment of participants
		Ethics and politics		Language and meaning

Table 7. *Sieber's taxonomy of research ethics topics* (Sieber 2004: 408–412)

As illustrated in Table 7, this taxonomy does not describe concepts of issues according to their "type" (in the proper sense of a typology), but instead describes "topics" related to the conduct of research that are themselves likely to involve ethical issues.

4. Discussion

This section presents a critical examination of the results obtained in the systematic literature review. It presents three findings that led to certain avenues for reflection, before concluding with the study's strengths and limitations.

4.1. Documents dominated by descriptions and subjectivities

In their publication entitled *Argument-based medical ethics: A formal tool for critically appraising the normative medical ethics literature*, McCullough et al. (2004) distinguish between a normative and descriptive medical ethics literature. According to them, the descriptive ethics literature uses empirical methods to describe the ethical policies, judgements, and practises of individuals, groups, or organisations. The collection of empirical data would make it possible to enrich our knowledge of these realities and to better identify ethical issues and how they are experienced in practice. By contrast, the literature on normative ethics is based on ethical argumentation and analysis and is more interested in ethical concepts and their implications (McCollough et al. 2004). Normative ethics also tends to take a position on what "should be" done under various situations, thus grouping together works that develop, analyse, or critically evaluate different ethical concepts or conceptions.

Following this distinction, the publications in our study were mainly examples of descriptive ethics. They describe the ethical issues experienced by researchers or research participants, but few articulate a theoretical or normative reflection on these issues or reflect on theoretical or normative grounds pertaining to the ethical issues experienced in research. On the whole, the normative grounds employed by the authors, although generally not highly refined, are used consistently and accurately, that is, in accordance with the theories and authors to which they refer. The rest of the publications that did not have an explicit theoretical basis (n=56, i.e., nearly 84% of the corpus) described certain ethically problematic situations, sometimes referring to the values recognised in the context (of the moral agents or institutions concerned) or with reference to traditional values and principles of bioethics (Beauchamp

and Childress 2012). Overall, very little of the literature in our sample was based on normative theories or approaches. It is interesting to note that when normative grounds were identified in the publications, some implicitly referred to the ethical principles put forward by Beauchamp and Childress (e.g., Hansson 2017 or Lynöe 1999), but the only publications that explicitly cited these principles did so in order to critique them as being insufficient to understand the full scope of ethical issues that may arise in research (Colnerud 2015, Locke 2013).

However, the majority of publications (57%) were not entirely consistent with descriptive ethics, as understood by McCullough et al. (2004), because most did not use empirical research methods. Indeed, our review shows that the corpus is instead dominated by testimonies, i.e., works by researchers who, based on their own experiences, describe the issues they experience or have experienced, without resorting to empirical methods. Also, when reflections were articulated on these issues, they were most often based on the authors' opinions with few theoretical or normative resources mobilised to support these reflections.

Of course, any reflection on ethical issues and their description, if it is to be meaningful, ought to refer to practical experience found "in the field", to use a frequent expression, whether to develop practical knowledge or to promote awareness among the actors concerned. However, reflections that are based solely on individual experiences and perspectives, and that are not supported by theoretical references or the collection of empirical data, inevitably have limitations. In particular, these publications often did not go beyond the narration of individual experiences, and did not clearly or precisely name the issues or problems discussed.

The predominance of the descriptive and the individual in the conceptualisation of ethical issues in the literature analysed raises questions about the reasons for this and its consequences. One might argue that this focus on the particular and the descriptive reflects a certain neglect of the criteria of rationality and scientific knowledge that all research, including applied ethics research, should strive towards. Alternatively, one might also question why so many authors describe the ethical issues they experience in a purely subjective manner. And why should one a subjective statement be less credible if it is not supported by strong and theoretically established ethical principles? These questions might lead one to view the research community not as ethically negligent, but rather as lacking the ethical vocabulary that is adapted to or can do justice to the ethical realities that are described. While the literature review seems to indicate that researchers have little knowledge of the ethical theories, methods, and vocabulary used in the field of applied ethics, the causes could be twofold: 1) a lack of ethical education of researchers in general (i.e., researchers do not have the knowledge or skills needed to identify and evaluate ethical issues they encounter) and/or 2) an absence of empirical applied ethics research on the conduct of research (i.e., we simply do not know what researchers know or do not know about ethical issues).

4.2. Evaluating the definitions identified

The definitions listed in Table 4 for 'ethical dilemma' and 'ethical problem' need further qualification. The first impression when one reads both Molyneux et al.'s and Mortari and Harcourt's definitions is that they are oddly alike, in that both of them infer a (1) problematic situation requiring (2) some choice between alternatives. That would not be questionable in the slightest should both definitions be employed to refer to the same object, but this is not the case. Molyneux *et al.* define 'ethical problem' as a choice between different things which would require some degree of *ethical analysis* or pondering. The question may be asked, then, as to what, precisely, differentiates Molyneux *et al.*'s definition of an 'ethical problem' from Mortari & Harcourt's definition of an 'ethical dilemma'. Indeed, Mortari *et al.* suggest that an 'ethical dilemma' occurs "when a problematic situation arises where there are two opposite solutions" (Mortari and Harcourt 2012: 236).

The way Mortari and Harcourt (2012) conceptualise the ethical dilemma is, in some respects, similar to how it is defined in the literature, although it would be relevant to remember that some accounts vary greatly from one author to another. Generally speaking, however, an ethical dilemma is considered to have three essential characteristics that distinguish it from other ethical issues: it is a situation in which the agent (1) has to make a decision between at least two alternatives, (2) has the ability to do each of them, but (3) is unable to do all of them as they are not compatible. This impossibility is characteristic of the ethical dilemma: it seems to condemn the agent to moral failure, because whatever choice they make will be flawed (McConnell 2018). Among the authors who have taken an interest in the ethical dilemma, however, some important distinctions are sometimes made about its characteristics. Some, for example, separate ethical dilemmas by suggesting that they fall into two sub-categories: epistemic conflicts and ontological conflicts (*cf*. Donagan 1977; Ross 1930; Tessman 2015). The dilemma is an epistemic conflict when the agent does not know which ethical requirements take precedence in the context, while it is an ontological conflict when neither of the ethical requirements of the dilemma can be said to be superior or inferior to the other, regardless of the agent's ability to make this distinction (McConnell 2018).

In light of these nuances, if one were to agree, even as a working assumption, that the definition Mortari and Harcourt employ is correct in its conceptualising of what constitutes an 'ethical dilemma', then there appears to be two possible ways to interpret the ambiguity arising in Molyneux et al.'s conceptualisation. The first way, which we believe is a weaker explanation, could be that their definition is erroneous. But that appears to be a weak explanation, because the definitions used by the authors in our literature review are contextualised. In other words, Molyneux et al.'s definition of 'ethical dilemma' may be comprehensible through its application in a particular context.

4.3. Poorly conceptualised ethical issues within documents

Considering the difficulties involved in dealing with sometimes complex ethical issues, conceptualisation work can be an effective way of moving away from subjectivity, i.e., from mere opinion or testimony based on individual experience. Nevertheless, as indicated in the previous section, the vast majority of the literature attests to limited ethical knowledge in the majority of the publications reviewed. Contrary to the idea that ethical issues can only be experienced and described in a tacit and personal way, we argue that it is possible to put forward concepts of ethical issues that cover situations that correspond more adequately and that these can and should be defined as clearly as possible.

Conceptualisation refers to the elaboration of concepts, which are abstract representations of a mental order, an object or phenomenon or a set of objects or phenomena with common characteristics (Honderich 2005). Conceptualising thus refers to the cognitive process by which words, designating concrete or abstract phenomena, are identified, defined and distinguished in a logical manner, according to the common traits they intend to encompass (Drolet 2014). As previously indicated, this article focuses on three components that make it possible to assess the quality of the conceptualisations found in the literature: the concepts of ethical issues, the theoretical or normative foundations of these concepts, and the typologies of ethical issues that are mobilised.

As the results of our study show, very few authors define the concepts of the ethical issues (or its synonyms) that they use in their publication. At the same time, many different terms or expressions are used in the literature to discuss problematic ethical situations (n=10), e.g. ethical dilemma, temptation, silence, distress, blindness and myopia (Fulford 2004; Jameton 1984; Swisher et al. 2005). While the absence of definitions can leave room for imprecision, the use of a large number of more or less related concepts is also likely to lead to conceptual confusion. It is unclear whether the authors of the publications we reviewed believe that these concepts can be used interchangeably; the fact is that a majority of the literature reviewed leaves the reader to speculate as to the meaning of the concepts that are used. It is possible that certain concepts such as injustice or risk require fewer conceptual distinctions to be understood, as the reality to which they refer is more intuitively accessible. On the other hand, it is more difficult, for example, to know what distinguishes a problem from an ethical dilemma or issue. Although, as mentioned above, the term "ethical issue" is the most commonly used, it is never defined, as if its meaning is self-evident. But is it? Why should ethical notions be taken for granted? This seems to reveal a fundamental flaw in ethical reflection on the conduct research, i.e., in research ethics and scientific integrity (responsible conduct of research): the vast majority of publications in our study fail to draw upon even a minimal understanding of the object from which the reflection in question unfolds. Might this explain, at least in part, the many ethical issues that arise in research? Ideas and concepts can open our eyes and help us understand certain realities that are sometimes difficult to grasp, and they give us the means to deal with these situations in an ethically desirable way. This is why we consider a weak conceptualisation to be so worrying. The weak ethical conceptualisation that we observed may mean that researchers generally have limited knowledge of ethics and lack the ethical resources needed to support them in resolving the many ethical issues they experience in research.

Overall, the conceptualisations that we uncovered encompass a large array of ethical issues that may arise in the conduct of research. However, such conceptualisations may not always be as precise as they ought to be. For example, confusing ethical myopia with an ethical dilemma seems absurd in many ways, but particularly because the words used ultimately serve to describe different realities that must be managed differently in order for the situation to be adequately addressed. Typologies already exist (*cf.* Swisher 2004, 2005; Fulford 2004) that can shed light on these nuances and help to better conceptualise and understand other realities for which the current ethical vocabulary may be lacking.

4.4 Evaluating the Typologies

With regard to the typologies identified in the literature, the one proposed by Bruhn et al. (2002) is of particular interest. It consists of a diagnostic tool for ethical breaches in research, with two axes (the origin of the breach and its severity), that we believe has the potential to generate relevant questions and could be a useful resource for researchers and academic institutions. It should be noted that the axis devoted to the origin of the breach suggests that the factors and actors that led to the breach be targeted because they are essential elements in the identification of appropriate solutions. This axis reveals that the origins of breaches may be individual or organisational in nature, which is relevant considering that many ethical issues in research are systemic in nature (Drolet and Girard, *in press*). As for the axis of seriousness, this suggests that the measures to be taken in the event of a breach must be adapted to the seriousness of the breach, which is also particularly be relevant. However, the typology does not offer precise categories of ethical breaches, which is an important limitation, and so it may be difficult for actors to identify ethical breaches given their potentially limited knowledge of ethics, as revealed in our systematic review. Moreover, this typology is based on the definition of the concept of ethical failure presented earlier in Table 4, which states that it is necessarily committed intentionally. Yet, it is possible that a researcher's ignorance or a team's good intentions may have led to these ethical failures, or that the perverse effects of the methods of funding or regulation of research may paradoxically lead to ethical failures. The intentionality of the ethical failure is, in our opinion, problematic in the definition proposed by Bruhn et al. (2002).

To avoid demonising the actors or organisations and to do more justice to the complex and multifactorial realities experienced in research, it would be preferable to discuss ethical breaches in a more neutral manner, without undue reference to the intentionality of the actors or organisations, which in any case often cannot be demonstrated. Bruhn *et al.*'s typology might be better associated with Sieber's (2004) typology, which groups 21 research-related themes into five categories that are largely complete. Almost all of the issues identified in our study overlapped with or could be grouped under these themes. However, these themes are very specific to the field of research, and therefore have little potential for transferability to other areas of practice (an advantage that would be gained by a typology dealing with ethical issues in general). That being said, the combination of these typologies is likely to support ethical practice in research. Thus, our review, which aims to support responsible research practises, has identified at least two tools that have the potential to advance this goal.

4.5. Strengths and limitations

Regarding our study's strengths, first, this review of the literature helped identify some important practical tools to support the responsible conduct in research. Second, the study provided a portrait of the state of conceptualisation of ethical issues in research that reveals the fact that researchers likely have little training in ethics and little mastery of the rich vocabulary of applied ethics (or bioethics). Recognising this is important in order to counter ethical failures in research. The very credibility of science is at risk of being tainted by such failures, hence the relevance of the inventory proposed in this article. Third, to make this diagnosis, we showed the pertinence of deploying a method appropriate for applied ethics research, namely that of McCullough et al. (2007). Such an approach could be used by other researchers who aim to document the understanding of ethical issues by the academic community, whether in general or for specific disciplines or fields of research.

The limitations of our study are primarily related to the search strategy. Although our database search was as exhaustive as possible, we may have missed some publications, e.g., because of access restrictions or the language of publication. Another important limitation to consider is the theoretical perspective employed in this study: it is indeed possible that, without intention on our part, the Western theoretical perspective in which we are situated may lead to a universalisation of vision, scope and consequences that blinded us to other cultural perspectives about the ethics of the conduct of research.

5. Conclusion.

To gesture at a summing up, this article has mainly been interested in the way authors, coming from various academic fields, conceptualise the ethical issues arising in the conduct of research. More specifically, we wished to offer a theoretical and critical reflection on the vocabulary and conceptual categories used in the publications reviewed to discuss the ethical issues raised in research. To understand better how the ethical issues involved in conducting research are conceptualised in the publications reviewed, we 1) established an inventory of the conceptualisations reviewed, and 2) we critically assessed them. We found that the publications reviewed mostly showed examples of descriptive ethics, in that most authors describe ethical issues without reflecting much on them. This could be explained both by 1) a lack of ethical education in research contexts, and 2) by the fact that we do not know what researchers know (or do not) about ethical issues. Additionally, the definitions identified in the publications are scarce and at times imprecise. However, that fact that some authors define different words similarly seems to suggest more a need for the ethics vocabulary to apply itself to current ethical contexts in research than to point to a lack of proper conceptualisation on the part of the authors. Further, it appears from our review that very few authors offer proper conceptualisations of the ethical issues arising in conducting research. When dealing with vast arrays of ethical issues to conceptualise, perhaps one ought to remember that some typologies already exist that could guide further reflection and help understand other realities for which the current ethical vocabulary may be lacking. As for the typologies we uncovered, like that of Bruhn et al. (2002) and Sieber (2004), we believe their combination, both with other well-developed typologies and critical reflection, could help support better ethical practice in conducting research.

Perhaps the results we uncovered in the critical literature review will ignite further projects to see just how to conceptualise and understand the ethical issues arising in conducting research. At the very least, it seems that in the research community, and in a broader educational context, the results of our current research have the potential, however slim, to inform critical thinking about how to conduct research ethically. Critical reflection, followed by a persistent personal assessment of one's posture, attitude and action as a researcher, are positive consequences that can be achieved by highlighting the conceptual problems outlined above: in other words, it is a matter of remaining vigilant in one's ethical actions.

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