

Empirical Methods in Bioethics Education

Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues

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Three questions

- Why do bioethicists need to understand empirical research?
- How does bioethicists' work intersect with empirical research?
- What do bioethicists need to understand?

Realizing Bioethics' Goals in Practice:

Ten Ways "Is" Can Help "Ought"

by MILDRED Z. SOLOMON

A familiar criticism of bioethics charges it with being more conceptual than practical—having little application to the “real world.” In order to answer its critics and keep its feet on the ground, bioethics must utilize the social sciences more effectively. Empirical research can provide the bridge between conceiving a moral vision of a better world, and actually enacting it.

Two broad roles for empirical scholarship in bioethics

- Inform ethical analysis
- Move from moral vision to ethical behavior and effective, justifiable policy

Inform ethical analysis

- Identify new moral problems that require ethical analysis
- Clarify known and suspected moral problems
- Test consequentialist claims
- Evaluate implications of non-consequentialist principles

Move from moral vision to ethical behavior and policy

- Document gap between ideals and practice
- Clarify causal mechanisms behind moral problems
- Provide data that facilitate accountability and change
- Evaluate interventions to address moral problems

Bioethicists engage empirical research in diverse ways

- As investigators
- To inform normative or policy-oriented scholarship
- As advisers to others
- Occasionally, as policymakers

What does bioethics education need to encompass?

- Principles of inference
- Observational and experimental research design
- Survey methodology
- Qualitative research methods

Research ethics: a special case

- Research ethicists make or influence important decisions on policy & individual cases
- Requires sophisticated understanding of research design and statistical methods

Final thoughts

- High-quality, high-impact bioethics requires
 - Interdisciplinarity
 - Translation to policy & practice
 - Grounding in nuanced appreciation of relevant empirical realities