

Ethicalization in Bioscience—A Pilot Study in Finland

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Background

Concepts that refer to trends like globalization and medicalization have, of late, become a hallmark of public debates. The logic of such concepts is that the same word can refer both to good and bad developments, partly depending on the chosen viewpoint. Hardly anyone opposes the global enforcement of human rights, but the global liberation of trade is sometimes viewed with suspicion. In a similar vein, advances in medicine are seldom seen as a bad thing, but medical solutions to social issues can be seen as problematic.

Taking this idea further, should *ethics* also be examined as a double-edged sword, like the waning of national borders and the redefinition of social ills as individual diseases? The regulation and evaluation of biosciences is increasing, and this is probably a healthy tendency—at least to a certain extent. But has the limit already been reached? Is medical and biological research threatened by *ethicalization*?

This question has been brewing in Finland (and, of course, in many other countries) for quite some time. It became tangible to us during the Academy of Finland research program Life 2000, for which we provided the ethical expertise. Toward the end of that program, we decided that it is time to start seeking answers to the question, first in Finland and then, we hope, also internationally.

How the Study Was Conducted

In 2003–2004, a member of our team, Jukka Takala, interviewed 10 Finnish bioscientists on how they see the impact of ethical control on their work. The interviews proceeded thematically from quality arrangements to more strictly ethical topics. The questions covered were roughly divided into four groups:

- What kinds of quality assurance systems are used in your institute and how is good practice identified? Are these systems a burden or a benefit to the work done?
- What do you think that ethics is? How is work done in your institute ethically regulated? Have you participated in this regulation? What are your experiences of it? Is anything in it futile?

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- Do people in your field discuss ethics more than they used to do, and have you been involved in these discussions yourself? Are there burning ethical issues in your field? What is the impact of ethics on your work? Is this impact good, bad, or indifferent?
- Have you noticed an increase in the ethical control of your work? How does ethical control influence your work? Is this influence detrimental? If so, how could it be counteracted? Who is an ethical expert?

The bioscientists interviewed were volunteers from two Academy of Finland research programs, Life 2000 and Systems Biology and Bioinformatics. Most of them were clinical scientists, but basic research in molecular biology, biochemistry, and genetics was also represented. The discussions lasted for 30 to 60 minutes, and they were tape recorded with the permission of the participants. Full transcriptions of the discussions were prepared. The full results of the interviews are described in “Does Ethicalization Concern Bioscientists? A Pilot Study on the Attitudes of Finnish Bioscientists towards Ethics” (64 pp., in Finnish).

What Was Found Out?

Those interviewed seemed to draw a significant distinction between the “internal” and “external” assessment of their activities. Internal aspects comprise good professional practice and the scientific assessment of research plans; external dimensions include official regulations and critical accounts in the media.

About Internal Ethics

In this pilot study, researchers strongly emphasized their own responsibility for the good performance of scientific tasks. Top-down rules were resented, and the researchers were reluctant to leave important decisions to nonscientific authorities. Ethical conduct was identified with good professional practice and with an internalized sense of what is right and what is wrong.

Although personal responsibility was stressed, those interviewed also conceded that laws and regulations are needed in the control of scientific activities. Most participants had been involved in the work of ethics committees, and many found a justification for these committees in the fact that some professionals can be slacker in their practices than others. Even if one’s own work is impeccable, this is not necessarily true of everybody else in the field. Some fail to grasp the requirements of proper scientific conduct in their work, and others can ignore these requirements if they seem to hinder their research. And apart from failures in understanding and behavior, even the best scientists sometimes need peer approval and official sanctions to lean on in what they do.

About External Ethics

Attitudes toward regulations and ethics committees seemed to change, however, as the interviews progressed. At the early stages of the discussions, the impression that ethics committees are necessary and useful was predominant. But as the encounters with the interviewer grew longer, comments concerning the time-consuming and downright irritating nature of regulations started to emerge. One scientist opined that research simply cannot go on if any more controls are introduced. Many norms and rules were also seen as too rigid to be applied to

real-life research, where it is often impossible to tell in advance how the project will develop.

The interviewed scientists expected ethical experts to have wisdom, knowledge, and an ability to cooperate across disciplines. Philosophical training was seen as an asset, but scientific know-how and a good grip of the field under scrutiny were seen as the most important cornerstones of evaluation. When study designs and plans are assessed, it is paramount, the interviewees believed, to master the technical details.

Although no one wanted to stifle free speech, attitudes toward science news and criticism were reserved. Many scientists thought that the general public should be better educated in scientific matters, but they partly blamed themselves for not being able to inform people about advances in their field in a sufficiently popular way. Lack of time and resources were identified as the main reasons for this regrettable shortcoming. Science critics, it was felt, can fully concentrate on formulating their unfavorable arguments, whereas researchers have to disseminate information and defend their own views in the limited time left over from their scientific work.

About Ethicalization

In the pilot study we tried to find out, in a preliminary way, whether bioscientists are concerned about the increasing impact of ethics on their work—about “ethicalization.” The results can be divided into three groups, according to three interpretations of ethics defined in the course of the interviews. These are *good professional practice*, *external regulation*, and *public debate*.

- The development of good professional practices among researchers was unambiguously and unanimously accepted and encouraged.
- External regulation was seen as necessary to avoid mistakes based on indifference or pressures, but many actual assessment procedures were also regarded as hindrances to research.
- Criticism of science in the media was largely seen as a sign of ignorance and sensationalism.

Because the number of interviewees was small, the results cannot be generalized to all bioscientists in Finland or elsewhere. They lend, however, some support to the view that most researchers want to do their work well and ethically but do not always want lay audiences or experts from other fields to dictate what they can or cannot do.

About the Need for Further Studies

The work in the project continues in Finland and in other countries. The team is constantly looking for international partners with whom comparisons between regions and cultures could be made. Bioethicists have received the initial results and the ongoing research with cautious enthusiasm—very few studies have so far been conducted into the attitudes and concerns of bioscientists. The team’s plan is to involve more scientists and ethicists in informal and formal discussions on their views of the regulation of life sciences and on the potential threat of ethicalization in the field.