

Bioethics (Re)Considered is dedicated to exploring the organizational, social, and cultural context of bioethics. Authors who would like their papers to be considered for future Bioethics (Re)Considered sections should submit papers directly to the section editors, Raymond De Vries (rdevries@umich.edu) and Jill Fisher (jill.fisher@unc.edu). Please submit manuscripts as Word documents attached to an e-mail.

Introduction

Exploring the Organizational, Social, and Cultural Context of Bioethics

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Bioethics is no ordinary academic discipline. Like other fields of inquiry, bioethics has both theoretical and applied dimensions, but it is the only discipline with a remit to offer *moral* guidance. Political science, for example, can (and does) provide theoretically informed advice on how to create effective social policies, but it makes no claim about the moral correctness of those policies. This unique aspect of bioethics invites research and reflection on the sources, location, foci, and consequences of this relatively new inter-discipline. What social and cultural forces called bioethics into being? Where and how has bioethics (successfully) established itself? Among the myriad moral issues in medicine and the life sciences, which ones have commanded the attention of bioethicists? Has bioethics altered the way healthcare and medical research are done?

Bioethics (Re)Considered is a new section of *CQ* dedicated to exploring the organizational, social, and cultural context of bioethics. Over the past several years, the field of bioethics has begun

to see the social sciences as a source of rich descriptions that can be used to inform normative ethics. Although the integration of the social sciences is important to the work of bioethics, it is problematic to assume—as many in the field do—that the contribution of these disciplines to bioethics is limited to description. When it is merely descriptive, social science is unmoored from its intellectual history and becomes atheoretical and simplistic, a method without methodology. Indeed, much of what travels under the banner of “empirical bioethics” is done by those who have learned empirical methods but have no grounding in the analytic tradition of social science. This fact devalues the skills and expertise that social scientists bring to bioethics and encourages the production of empirical research devoid of the kind of rich analysis the social sciences can afford. For example, many empirical projects in bioethics assume that the answers to research questions can be found in the words of interviewees or focus group members. Lacking a social science

sensibility, researchers fail to make *meaning* out of their data; a simple report of what was said becomes the end point of research. Social science research focuses not just on what respondents say but on how their perceptions of the subject at hand—be it ethical dilemmas in the clinic, informed consent, or decisional capacity—are connected to the social conditions in which they live and work and to the cultural ideas that animate

their world. The best social science scholarship in bioethics adds complexity to discussions about how medicine and science ought to be practiced and provokes critical thinking about ethical dilemmas. *Bioethics (Re)Considered* invites essays and research that locate the work of bioethics in social and cultural space, helping those who do bioethics to better understand and appreciate the unique nature of their vocation.