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Field Notes

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Come together. During the past decade my research has compared health policies in the United States, Asia, and Europe. My training in political science helps me understand why these policies exist and how to document their consequences. While these are important questions, social science is often silent about what policies we *ought* to adopt. This frustrates policy-makers, who look to experts for guidance about what to do. The heavily qualified advice offered by social scientists often limits its value.

In contrast, bioethicists draw on philosophy, law, and medicine to identify universal principles for moral decisions but rarely base their claims on empirical evidence from social science. While bioethics provides clearer direction to policy-makers than does social science, its lack of attention to empirical evidence about how people make decisions, what people value, or what can be achieved in a particular economic and political context limits its power. Bioethics, its critics contend, is out of touch with the real world.

Collaborations among bioethicists and social scientists have the potential to contribute to more informed public deliberation. These collaborations, however, are rare. A December 2009 meeting at The Hastings Center brought together bioethics and social scientists to understand why.

Institutional barriers: Scholars in bioethics and each of the social science disciplines have jobs in separate departments and different parts of universities. This discourages the regular interaction that leads to collaboration. Beyond physical separation, scholars are not rewarded for interdisciplinary collaboration. To achieve tenure and reach prominence within their home discipline, social scientists are encouraged to focus on building theory within their discipline, not for engaging in the more externally focused research that is the hallmark of bioethics.

The naturalistic fallacy: British philosophers David Hume and G.E. Moore famously contended that it is impossible to make claims about what we “ought” to do based on information about what “is.” The strict separation of facts and values is criticized by many. Facts are “socially constructed,” and explanations of the world often depend crucially on normative assumptions. Nevertheless, the fact-value split remains a powerful idea. Because bioethics is concerned with normative questions, it views empirical evidence as irrelevant. Social scientists respond to this idea by eschewing explicit normative claims for fear of being labeled “unscientific.” In the social sciences, taking sides on a moral question is often a sign of bad scholarship.

“Universal” values: Bioethics does not just make normative claims, it tries to make claims that are universal. This presents yet another conflict with social science. Research from social science frequently highlights the extent to which values are culturally specific, not universal.

Opportunities for exchange: Encouraging interdisciplinary scholarship, even among social scientists, is always difficult. Overcoming the epistemological disagreements and professional tensions that limit collaborations between bioethics and social science is particularly daunting. As an institution dedicated to connecting values and public policy, The Hastings Center provides a space for those who are interested in bringing these perspectives together. Our meeting on bioethics and social science was a good start, and I look forward to continuing this important conversation.

—Michael K. Gusmano
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