

Review of: "Social responsibility, disciplinary moral identity, and not-so-value-free biomedical research(ers)"

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The author addresses a highly interesting and relevant issue related to the consequences of applying RRI and social responsibility to value-laden disciplines, such as biomedical research, bringing to the arena the potentially negative effects these policies might have in terms of the researchers' disciplinary moral identity and perception of one's moral excellence. The main assumption is that fostering this kind of responsibility related policies carry a potential risk of excessive reinforcement of researchers' moral excellence at the expense of interdisciplinarity and public engagement. While the theoretical arguments offered by the author may support this idea, the assumption would require more empirical evidence (as recognized by the author).

Still, scrutinizing the approach and practice, the transformation of policy into action is necessary in the field of social responsibility and especially, in RRI, which has hardly passed the phase of emerging discipline or a new transversal R&I framework and is still in constant conceptual renovation, expanding frontiers of the knowledge. RRI is currently moving from the pilot studies to the consolidated practice in research organizations, universities and funding agencies (especially EC), while critical voices on the future and impact of the discipline arise. In RRI and other similar approaches, practice might bring interesting insights to theory as one of the ideas, inherent to these visions is that not only innovations, but also knowledge can be co-created and can stem from diverse groups of stakeholders. I would suggest the author to consider finding some examples or evidence in this sense (in similar value-laden discipline contexts), that can give evidence of the negative effects, to support the main assumption. Several studies referred to in the current paper seem suggest these ideas, but do not seem to offer solid empirical evidence.

Section 1 makes a clarifying introduction to the research and is well grounded. Section 2 deals with the science-society relation, relating the current research subject to the Value-Free Ideal of science and presenting the alternative idea of science embedded to society and the co-production ideal. Both of these alternative ideas are aligned with the RRI and other responsibility approaches of R&I, and especially RRI encourages the reflective attitude among scientist, and fosters active public engagement, involving different stakeholders to the research. Our experience in RRI related research projects has proven that applying co-production, deep research ethics, gender equity and other key principles of responsible research is definitely challenging, and that aspects such as collaborative design, innovation, decision making and evaluation are time consuming and require great human resource efforts, but still, they can produce more socially desirable outputs.

Section 3 explores the transformative capacity of innovation in biomedical research and links it to the economic growth.

Though the exploitability of the R&I outcomes is often related to the economic growth, in RRI the focus is more in finding a balance between economic growth, planetary sustainability and human well-being. After several R&I projects where we used RRI framework, I find that innovation does not need to bring direct economic benefits in the form of commercial products or services, but it can contribute to processes, partial improvements of proceedings and technologies or it can be social innovation with no direct commercial aims. As RRI framework is in constant evaluation, conceptual updates often stem from the application and may challenge the theories.

Sections 4 and 5 offer an interesting reflections on disciplinary moral identities and the interdisciplinarity of responsibility, opening new refreshing angles to the discussion. The author suggests that the collective moral identity or the disciplinary moral identity plays an important role in shaping the individual identity of a researcher, but it may also defy one's own self-representation (e.g. as being morally right, being on the right side, etc.). In future work, it might be interesting to connect this idea to research done in the field of 'groupal thinking'. The author analyses the difficult match between interdisciplinarity and the institutionalisation of social responsibility, focusing on the idea that interdisciplinary interactions might foster social responsibility. The inclusion of a social scientist/humanist to STEM projects does not guarantee that reflexion on the socio-ethical issues becomes embedded into the initiative nor does it necessarily make the project more responsible.

Finally, the author argues and brings some empirical evidence (from previous works) to the idea that biomedical researchers have a strong disciplinary moral identity, they work towards socially desirable ends, reflect upon the impact of their work, work in multidisciplinary teams in a value-laden field...but also, they sometimes may display 'moral superiority', develop a 'self-enhancement bias' or a sense of 'infallibility'. In interdisciplinary research, different disciplinary moral identities may collide and cause moral issues.

Section 6 deals with public engagement and co-production, questioning how and at what stages of research these can happen and if they actually can make research socially responsible. Our experience in RRI related multidisciplinary research raised similar doubts in the beginning, but we then resolved that in order to comply with the RRI requirements, representatives of diverse stakeholders groups (academy/research, policymaking, civil society, education, businesses) could be included to collaborate at all project phases, from the rationale and design to the evaluation, enriching this way the social embedding of the initiatives.

As noted by the author in concluding remarks, his research on the potential barriers to the institutionalization of social responsibility in research would require more evidence, as the current paper is theoretical. In my point of view, exploring the unexpected or unwanted consequences motivated by the social responsibility or RRI policy application is challenging, because, at least to some extend, many of these effects might be found in the practice even without any demands of 'becoming responsible'. It might be more a question of tailoring the idea of responsibility and adjusting it to the field of biomedicine, in itself already a value-laden discipline. Still, this paper makes an interesting contribution to the knowledge in this field and shakes the idealistic idea of RRI and social responsibility.

