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

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In an era where politicians, scientists, philosophers and lay people of all kinds contest what ‘truth’ is, it is certainly important to critique research values, particularly in the biomedical arena. The author argues that following the demise of the ‘value-free’ ideal (which I take to mean a kind of abstract positivism) new conceptions of science have emerged. The author takes the worthy position that all researchers—even those engaged in the natural sciences or so-called purely theoretical research which (appear to) be) less value-laden than the social sciences—need to consider the social consequences of their research, and that biomedical researchers do not have “the right value judgements necessary to the kind of social responsibility required by current policy frameworks and by the co-production ideal”. This is an important critical perspective on the current state of biomedical research and researchers.

One of the key questions, it seems to me, is whether biomedical researchers and practitioners have been equipped with the skills and resources—including time—to think critically about what they are doing. In an often-litigious practice environment filled with 15-minutes intervals and risk-avoidance, and highly competitive funding environments where research may sit at a nexus that includes career development and political whim as well as the advancement of knowledge, is there the opportunity to step back and consider ‘big picture’ questions about diagnoses, interventions and longer-term consequences of research and practice? The author makes the important case that ‘science’ does not sit apart from ‘scientist’, and even where scientists are encouraged to be value-free, this idealised reality is hardly achievable. Nevertheless, the illusion that science is value free may simply mean that the researcher does not reflect on the social implications of their work. This does not make the science or the research value free, but rather unreflective. That said, the author also notes that labelling researchers as unreflective is far too simplistic, and I agree. However, knowing that your work is ethically questionable and having the agency and courage to question it openly in the face of profit- or patient-care deadlines are quite different. Where I differ from the author is in assuming that biomedicine and health sciences (always) work towards socially desirable ends. There is no unitary agreement in what socially desirable means (a point to which I will return below), although there is certainly a dominant paradigm based on post-European Enlightenment values, which are themselves based on a kind of Christian heuristic (see Holland, 2019; Taylor, 2007 for a fuller exposition of this claim).

The author proposes that one way for biomedical researchers to be more reflective and critical is to engage with end-users, or patients, and their views ought always to be prioritised. This is a lovely concept, but the power imbalance between researchers/practitioners and ‘patients’ is usually insurmountable. In situations where discomfort is severe, or

decisions are required about quality of life or length of life, I would suggest that the vast majority of ‘patients’ will be guided, however subtly, by the biomedical expert, if only because they expect the expert by definition to have more knowledge and experience in a given condition than the ‘patient’. The power imbalance is decisive.

Although given the nature of the paper it would have been helpful for me for the author to have located themselves professionally and personally, I think the author has argued their important critique well throughout the paper. Nevertheless, I would like to encourage the author to a more radical critique. Considering the consequences of even the most apparently ethically neutral research, and certainly notions of ‘biomedical’, is necessary but insufficient in our 21st century global environment. I also postulate that no research can possibly be (or has ever been) value-free: the choice to study anything is the implementation of some kind of value. The choice to study the possibility of life on Europa rather than what we are doing to life at the bottom of the terrestrial oceans reflects a value of some kind. It is clear here on which side of the ‘value fee’ argument I sit. Nevertheless, that is not a place where I rest very long.

Most academics around the world are trained in post-Enlightenment notions of science with its implicit value-free (or arguably ‘value neutral’) positioning in respect to empirical knowledge. The notion of a single Truth drives experimentation and increasingly refined approximations of an idealised Truth. It is even notionalised that ‘health’ and ‘well-being’ are widely and consistently understood. While the emergence of the social sciences in the 20th century, along with qualitative research methodologies, have driven us to a more post-modern (or critical) theoretical approach that allows for multiple Truths (and even notions of well-being), behind all of these methods is the valorisation of particular kinds of knowledge and particular ways of knowing. Underpinning all of these epistemologies and knowledges is an empirical post-Enlightenment way of understanding knowledge and ways of knowing. Just as medical research is based on particular understandings of physiology, biology, and chemistry, social research has largely been premised on the apparent ways societies are organised and individual goals set and achieved. Education, social, economic, and related research is based on Western post-Freudian and Maslovian assumptions about human development that assume that the life goal of a human being is to individuate from parents and families of origin, and to compete in a society with others in order to satisfy individual needs (and perpetuate one’s genetic code). In making these assumptions we valorise them and teach our children that they are good, worthwhile and even admirable pursuits.

I, like many academics and researchers, live in a multi-cultural environment where people of many cultures, nationalities and customs rub up against each other. We have universities and research institutions where despite the diversity of cultures, most researchers have been educated in Western-influenced institutions that value particular kinds of knowledge and ways of doing research. I am a social work academic (what the author would call my ‘disciplinary identity’) whose discipline is ‘underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledges’ (International Association of Schools of Social Work & International Federation of Social Work, 2014). Social work researchers are required to consider and reflect on the social implications of every aspect of their research, and its practice implications. I live in a country (Aotearoa New Zealand) where, because of a Treaty with its indigenous peoples, academics and researchers are required seriously to interrogate Western values, sciences, and knowledges and at the very least become familiar with indigenous knowledges and understand the impact of our research on indigenous peoples. I live in a region (the Pacific) which was settled by seafaring Polynesian (and Micro- and Melanesian) peoples

who were untarnished by European navigational tools and strategies yet managed successfully to navigate and populate remote islands throughout the largest body of water on the planet. The social and economic problems in this region are largely the result of European colonialism (with its valorisation of profit for distant monarchs, capitalism and mercantilism), missionisation (with its emphasis on individual salvation), and climate change brought about by industrialised nations and their unfettered drive for profit and individual gain. This, I would propose, is the larger epistemic challenge of our age.

Undertaking reflective, ethical, and socially responsive research, then, or undertaking research of any kind with a view to its social consequences, is an admirable and even necessary goal. It is, I'm afraid, shutting the doors after the horses have bolted. The primary goal now must first be to interrogate the legacy values of Calvinism and its sanctions in favour of individual profit, and the assumptions of the Enlightenment which have dominated Western science for the last several centuries. Then academics and researchers must seriously undertake to understand that there really is more than one way of knowing. This goes far beyond multiple truths and 'alternative facts'. If we undertake critical reflection seriously, then we may come to entirely new understandings of what qualifies as social responsibility and social benefit. If we truly consult with the global 'patient'—that is, the end users of knowledge, we may discover that nearly 72% of the global population does not share accepted post-Enlightenment Western values and epistemologies (Henrickson, 2022, p. 209). I am not advocating for returning to more 'primitive' ways of knowing: I am inviting an even more radically inclusive epistemological critique than the author of the present paper proposes, one that does not merely consider the outcome of the application of a certain kind of knowledge, but on the ways that knowledges are produced.

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