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

Steffen Albrecht[1]

1 Karlsruhe Institute of Technology

Potential competing interests: I'm working at a TA institution and have contributed to putting into practice the concept of RRI in previous research work.

The author of this paper raises an important and interesting point in the debate about science and innovation: Some of the policies currently debated to improve research and innovation practices might have implications that run contrary to their intentions. The author discusses this point using the example of biomedical research and points out the vagueness and tentativeness of calls for more interdisciplinarity and participation to align it better with the needs of society. Especially the discussion of the example of biomedical research and the use of AI and its implications (pp. 5-6) are very interesting to read! They would merit more extensive treatment with a focus on the social processes that influence research directions rather than on individual motivations (which, in the end, remain opaque for external observers).

A problem I see with this text is that the focus on the "value-free ideal" (in the words of the author) is actually misleading and not helpful for the argumentation. Its critique is at the core of STS research since the beginning of this discipline, and it's less an empirical matter but rather a matter of the point of view whether or not scientific research is considered "value free". Researchers such as Donald MacKenzie (in Soc.Stud. of Sc. 23/1) and Bettina Heintz (in Soc. Stud. of Sc. 33/6) have shown that even mathematics is no "pure" science, but laden with social influences. And the role of the scientific community in shaping the "Denkstil" has already been scrutinized by Ludwik Fleck in his "Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact" from 1935. The consequence of such insights, in my view, is not to do away with reflections on the construction of such knowledge, but rather to intensify and improve it. Focusing on the concept of value-free science, and also unproven assumptions about the aims of biomedical research being primarily socially desirable (p. 5), in my view is not fruitful anymore.

Related to this observation, I would suggest a more thorough engagement with the "science policy frameworks" the author discusses (such as TA, ELSI and RRI, p. 4). The three frameworks have much in common, but there are also important differences that are not reflected in the paper: RRI, the youngest concept, is much broader and practice-oriented compared to ELSI and TA, with the latter having perhaps the strongest orientation towards decision-making about science and innovation.

To sharpen the focus of the paper and to bring out the argumentation more clearly, the author could focus more thoroughly on the biomedical field and point out the consequence of applying specific RRI principles, such as bringing in views from public stakeholders, in this field. I would also suggest to narrow down the theoretical discussion to the concept of co-construction and how it is used in the discourse around RRI. In order to go further than just a theoretical discussion

(p. 13) (which I consider very valuable in its own right!), the author could line out how his views could lay the basis for empirical work that would test some of the assumptions and thus contribute to further the debate about the practical conduct of research and innovation.