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Mapping perspectival ambiguity in Bioethics: revisiting the viewpoint warrant

1. Introduction

This poster reports on the current state of a doctoral thesis by PhD candidate Denis Kos from the Department of Information and Communication Sciences (University of Zagreb). It presents an original research approach to knowledge organization and provides documentational support in the field of bioethics. Specifically, this thesis aims to confront the problem of perspectival ambiguity in bioethics by considering the notion of perspectives as points of access to diverse outlooks on particular phenomena. The objective of this poster is to elaborate on why ethical issues have potential to be used as a starting point for investigative methodologies that aim to map the perspectival ambiguity surrounding particular (bioethical) phenomena.

2. Theoretical background

The orientation towards perspectival ambiguity calls for different theoretical perspectives stemming both from the workplace context of the candidate and the existing developments that aimed to address similar problems in the past. Hence, the thesis is being based specifically in the conceptualization of integrative bioethics (IB) which approaches bioethical topics with intent to integratively preserve the pluralism of perspectives that contribute to a full characterization of different bioethical phenomena i.e. pluriperspectivistically. The task to define a useful way to organize knowledge for such a complex field is to be supported by the conceptualizations of an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge organization (KO) as has been discussed by different authors in the field of KO (Hjørland and Albrechtsen 1995; Broughton 2002; Gnoli 2012; García Gutiérrez 2014; Albrechtsen 2015; Lopez-Huertas 2015; Szostak, Gnoli and Lopez-Huertas 2016). Finally, the candidate considers the recurring evocation of the concept of perspectives in IB and KO (Gnoli 2012; García Gutiérrez 2014; Lopez-Huertas 2015; Szostak, Gnoli and Lopez-Huertas 2016) and the viewpoint warrant in KO (Beghtol 2002) as the third theoretical foundation.

These foundations for the thesis all stem from the critique of the domination of disciplinary perspectives and the idea that we have to address scientific monoperspectivism by representation of how complex our understanding of what we experience can be which warrants the ability to look at knowledge from a number of different perspectives. However, Szostak, Gnoli and Lopez-Huertas (2016) stipulated that in order to achieve this, one first has to determine how much perspectival ambiguity there is in different studied knowledge domains. The candidate recognizes the outcomes
of the thesis as a contribution to understanding this kind of ambiguity with regard to bioethical phenomena and the complex network of perspectives that contribute to their definition.

3. Thesis methodology

The proposed methodology of the accepted thesis proposal consists of:

- a conceptual analysis of the concept of viewpoint warrant in order to elaborate its definition in the context of transdisciplinary KO, and in order to map the role of relevant concepts in its definition like: transdisciplinary knowledge, perspectives, knowledge integration, pluriperspectivism etc.;
- a bibliometrical and content analysis of literature in the field of IB to create a prototype system of relationships between studied bioethical phenomena, explored perspectives and characteristics of documents they are affiliated with;
- a study of expert consensus by using the Delphi method in order to submit the constructed prototype for validation which will be based upon group consensus of its exhaustiveness and appropriateness of term representation.

4. The potential of ethical issues for mapping perspectival ambiguity

The objective of this poster is to focus on the rationale why ethical issues have potential to be used as a starting point for investigative methodologies that aim to map the perspectival ambiguity surrounding particular (bioethical) phenomena. This rationale is based on the idea that the human experience influences what we assume to know and treat as fact. Such objectified truths constellate a personal or group understanding of the world. We propose that these constellations or viewpoints, derived from experience and personal or group history, can be identified when dealing with complex ethical questions. It is the nature of what is usually named an ethical issue to be problematic and because of this to be subject to diverse reasoning on how to define, interpret and resolve such issues. This diversity is the basis of ambiguity and since it stems from objectified constellations of personal or group understandings i.e. perspectives, it is a perspectival ambiguity.

However, ambiguity is often defined as “inexactness” and “the quality of being open to more than one interpretation” (Oxford Living Dictionaries) which is seen as a negative quality. The proposed thesis treats ambiguity as a neutral characteristic, the nature of things found in contested and negotiated understandings of the world. In his paper from 2011, Claudio Gnoli, referring to Beghtol, claims that the demand hidden in the viewpoint warrant, constitutes an ethical principle because no single perspective should be given priority over alternative perspectives. We believe that this demand for social justice also treats ambiguity as a neutral characteristic and as a real encountered quality. In other words, only when the diversity of outlooks is recognized not as problematic or unproblematic, but as an actual condition of social life can ambiguity
become a valid basis of knowledge organization. The notion of integrative bioethics which aims to integratively preserve the pluralism of perspectives that contribute to a full characterization of different bioethical phenomena (i.e. pluriperspectivistically) treats perspectives in the same way. Here goals of IB match those of transdisciplinary KO, since the dialogic interaction of perspectives on ethical issues can only be achieved if we have knowledge about and appreciation of the ambiguity which surrounds them.

5. Conclusion

This poster proposes that ethical issues, as one of the most ambiguous areas of study, are central to studies of perspectival ambiguity which remains a key challenge of transdisciplinary KO, and proposes methodologies to approach the resolution of these challenges. Studies that aim to describe the perspectival nature of documents and the characteristics of found perspectives show just how complex our understanding of what we experience can be and restitutes ambiguity as a valid research interest.

References