



EVALUACIÓN DE LA INVESTIGACIÓN: EL CASO DE LA BIOÉTICA ACADÉMICA ITALIANA

RESEARCH EVALUATION: THE CASE OF ITALIAN ACADEMIC BIOETHICS

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RESUMEN:

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Un nuevo sistema para evaluar los resultados de la investigación ha sido introducido en Italia, bajo la Ley n° 240 del 30 de Diciembre de 2010, la así llamada "Reforma Gelmini". Este sistema tiene su fundamento en la separación entre la evaluación de resultados de investigación con referencia a las ciencias experimentales y la evaluación de resultados de investigación con referencia a las humanidades y ciencias sociales. La primera se basa en criterios bibliométricos, la segunda utiliza criterios no-bibliométricos. El artículo trata del impacto de este nuevo sistema en la bioética académica italiana.

ABSTRACT:

Keywords:

Research evaluation; bioethics; interdisciplinarity; Italy.

A new system for evaluating production of research has been introduced in Italy by the Law of 30 December 2010 no. 240 (also called *Gelmini's Reform*). This system is based on a strict distinction between the evaluation of "academic production" concerning "hard sciences" and evaluation of "academic production" concerning "humanities and social sciences". The first evaluation uses bibliometric criteria, while the second one uses non-bibliometric criteria. The article deals with the impact of this new system on Italian academic bioethics.

1. Interdisciplinarity and bioethics

Interdisciplinarity has long been valued in regard to the development of knowledge. One can mention the dramatic medical advances that have been made thanks to the "virtuous interaction" of disciplines such as medicine, chemistry, physics, engineering and others to approach and address health care

problems¹. Furthermore, it is likely that further advances will benefit from convergence among different fields of knowledge.

1 Boix Mansilla, V., Feller, I., Gardner, H. «Quality assessment in interdisciplinary research and education». *Research Evaluation* 15 (2006):69-74; Laudel, G., Origgi, G. «Introduction to a special issue on the assessment of interdisciplinary research». *Research Evaluation*, 15(2006): 2-4.

There is strong debate² as to whether Bioethics should be considered “strictly interdisciplinary” or simply as a form of “practical ethics.” In either, Bioethics in practice has always been a “place” of interaction among different disciplines. From an historical point of view the major disciplines brought to bear on the field have been medicine, moral philosophy and law, with important contributions from others including anthropology, sociology, economics, pedagogy, and theology.

2. Italian academic bioethics

In Italy, Academic bioethics is not considered to be an autonomous Scientific Disciplinary Sector (SSD), a term denoting discrete academic disciplines. Thus in Italy, Bioethics is not formally considered as an autonomous university discipline. Instead, Bioethics is mentioned as a possible topic under the SSDs of Medical history (MED/02), Forensic medicine (MED/43), where teaching is limited to clinical bioethics, and Philosophy of law (IUS/20).

An important consequence of these facts is that, in Italy, there are no Professors of Bioethics but only Professors of the SSDs noted above who may also teach bioethics in many degree courses.

To further complicate matters, Bioethics is not mentioned as a possible topic under the SSD of Moral philosophy (M-FIL/03), where it should be expected. In fact, curiously, advances in its use in pedagogy are occurring in the fields of medicine or law as well as sociology, anthropology, and theology, rather than in moral philosophy.

2 De Wachter, M.A. «Interdisciplinary bioethics: but where do we start? A reflection of epochè as method». *The Journal of philosophy and medicine*, 7 (1982): 275-287; Green, R.M. «Method in Bioethics: A Troubled Assessment». *The Journal of philosophy and medicine*, 15(1990): 179-197; Iltis, A.S. «Look who's talking: the interdisciplinarity of bioethics and the implications for bioethics education». *The Journal of philosophy and medicine*, 31(2006): 629-641; Pessina, A. «Moral philosophy in bioethics. Etsi ethos non daretur?». *Cuadernos de Bioética*, 24(2013): 169-178; Sawa, R.J. «Foundations of interdisciplinarity: a Lonergan perspective. *Medicine, health care, and philosophy*». 8 (2005): 53-61; Sgreccia, E. *Personalist Bioethics: Foundations and Applications*. The National Catholic Bioethics Center, Philadelphia, 2012.

3. Bioethical publications

Bioethical publications reflect two different epistemological approaches – the so-called “hard science” approach or the “humanistic” approach.

Publications employing the hard science approach are structured around objective, uniform, reproducible logics; regard quantifiable data as the gold standard of knowledge; often use a formalized language, especially algorithms; are written mainly in English and are brief; often are geared towards immediate practical uses including or in association with technological products; often are financed by industry; and often include multiple authors, reflecting the “research team” nature of the scientific endeavour.³

Humanistic scholarship or research, by contrast, is structured around logics that are subjective, unsettled, and difficult if not impossible to duplicate; generate knowledge through criticism or in-depth study; often use figurative and symbolic language; is difficult to translate from one language to another; is not oriented toward practical application and therefore is not of interest to industry; is characterized by longer articles, books and treatises; is often single-authored, local in its investigations, and is relatively inexpensive to produce because it does not generally require instrumental or structural supports.

These two approaches coexist in Bioethics, and may be combined in the same publication. Bioethical discussions of clinical cases, for example, require a thorough examination of scientific aspects, ethical assessment, and even reference to legal elements. In addition, bioethical writing that combines these two approaches may be found in scientific journals as well as monographs and popular literature, and bioethics experts may have mixed hard science and humanistic training.

4. The new system for evaluating products of research

A new system for evaluating Italian research publications has been introduced by the *Law of 30 December*

3 Calamo Specchia, F. «Quantità per qualità?». *Sanità Pubblica e Privata*, 1 (2014): 50-74.

2010 no. 240 (also called *Gelmini's Reform*). This system is based on a strict distinction between the hard sciences, using bibliometric criteria, and the humanities and social sciences, using non-bibliometric criteria.

Gelmini's Reform has had a strong impact on two important activities – the *Evaluation of Research Quality (VQR) 2004-2010* and the *National Scientific Qualification (ASN)*. The VQR evaluates Italian research publications while ASN provides standards for recruiting university professors.

The VQR evaluates Italian research publications by means of bibliometric criteria and peer review for hard-science publications, and by peer review and journal ranking for humanities and social science publications. In similar fashion, ASN evaluates scientific expertise based on bibliometric indicators (number of papers published in journals indexed in the Web of Science or Scopus databases, number of citations and Hirsch index) for hard-science SSD candidate. By contrast, humanities- and social-science SSD candidates, on the other hand, are evaluated on the basis of non-bibliometric indicators (number of books, book chapters and conference proceedings with ISBN, and number of articles published in the high-rank journals).

There is at the moment in Italy a heated debate on the correctness of evaluating scientific expertise on the basis of quantitative performance. We will not take up this topic here, but do wish to note that Gelmini's Reform, with its strict divisions, does not augur well for academic bioethics, with its interdisciplinary character. Many bioethics researchers, in fact, face the predicament of not having their publications recognized in the new system. In bioethics, many researchers with humanistic training publish scientific contributions, while researchers with scientific training often publish articles with humanistic elements. The latter case is particularly true for bioethical researchers working in schools of medicine, whose medical publications, under Gelmini's Reform, are now being evaluated on the basis of bibliometric indicators. Yet those same humanistic publications have long been considered relevant to medical school training because they add a humanistic

dimension to the field. The main difficulties of new criteria are that they have been implemented *ex-post facto*, thus downgrading the value of the many bioethical researchers' publications.

The strict distinction between the evaluation of research concerning hard sciences and the evaluation of research concerning humanities and social sciences could pose several risks. The first would be the disappearance of all branches of knowledge involving the interaction of different disciplines, as is the case with Bioethics. Researchers will cease to create "hybrid" publications if they will not receive proper credit for them. Italian academic bioethics, that is, may cease to exist.

A second risk is researcher conformity to the SSD trends, leading to homogenized and unoriginal research and research publications.

A third risk is opportunism, in which researchers choose their studies on the basis of "academic profit." It is no accident that many researchers who, in the past, published broad-ranging monographs now publish mainly articles, which are more academically profitable.

4. Conclusion and future perspectives

Evaluation of "academic production" is a worthy endeavour in principle. The fault of the current system is that it does not take into sufficient account the specificity of each discipline, and makes distinctions between the hard sciences and the humanities and social sciences that are arbitrary in some respects. Suggestions for improving the current system are to: 1) avoid reducing research evaluation to simple quantification; 2) take into account the specificity of each discipline; 3) involve scientific communities in defining evaluation criteria; and 4) employ mixed (bibliometric and non-bibliometric) systems to evaluate certain SSDs.

Creation of an autonomous SSD for Bioethics would be difficult to achieve and, in any case, would not resolve the current problem as long as strict distinction between the hard sciences and the humanistic domain and social sciences is maintained. Therefore, the best remaining hope is that interdisciplinarity will receive more consideration in academic evaluation and be

more highly valued. It is very difficult to evaluate the “real” quality of bioethical publications if that evaluation refers only to their “fit” with certain SSDs. This is fundamental point – how else to avoid having moral philosophers conclude that the level of ethical reflection involved in bioethical scholarship is unworthy of their efforts, and to avoid having scientists conclude that ethical considerations in regard to medicine are unworthy of their?

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