

Sociology of Bioethics: A New Academic Discipline

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1. Sociological researches of Bioethics

One of the relatively more recent facts which are relevant to bioethics is that it has become the topic of sociological research. The issue of what consequences will it have for *bioethics* is imposed, and again, what will be the consequences for *sociology* itself?

As far as sociology is concerned, the answer has already been given: a special branch of sociology, and there already exist a handful¹, is being formed=*Sociology of Bioethics*.

On the other hand, we shall have to wait a considerable amount of time to obtain the answer concerning bioethics, until the interaction bond materializes. Nevertheless, it can be expected that the consequences shall be very useful for bioethics because it shall overcome its weaknesses, which are pointed out by sociologists, more rapidly, and consequently it will develop into a prestigious science of the 21st century.

¹ In Croatia alone, at the University of Zagreb the following sociology subjects are being lectured: Educational Sociology, Knowledge and Science Sociology, Sociology of the Village, Urban Sociology, Migration Sociology, Sociology of Work, Organizational Sociology, Social Movements Sociology, Sociology of the Family, Religion Sociology, Culture Sociology, Ethnic Relations Sociology, Politics Sociology, Sociology of Economy, Army and War Sociology, Sociology of Risk, Sociology of Legal Rights, Historic Sociology, Sociology of Sexuality, Sociology of Technology, Sociology of the Croatian Society, Culture and Arts Sociology, Habitat and Environment Sociology, Sociology of Economical Behavior, Sociology of Music, Moral Sociology, Family and Sexuality Sociology, Sociology of Sport, Biosociology etc.

2. How and when developed the interest of Sociology for Bioethics?

Bioethics began to develop in the early 60-ties in America as a mixture of patients social rights and autonomy movement and theology-philosophical, legal and institutional answers to recent ethical issues in medicine and health, which have mostly emerged due to the scientific achievements of modern medicine and technological application of these achievements (the first apparatus for dialysis in Seattle: who is to live, who to die and who is to decide, ethical committees; who has the right to an abortion=pregnant women, churches or states and so forth?; the beginning and end of life=who has the moral right to decide on these issues?; the ill or patients that are undergoing examination-information, consent and misuse (abuse); new reproduction technologies, genetic manipulation, human and animal organ transplants etc.).

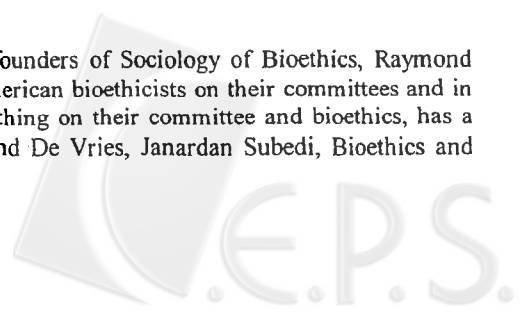
With the appearing of Potter's term "bioethics" in 1970/71, the nameless bioethical movement shapes into a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary branch of science connected to biomedicine, so the first bioethicists were theologians, philosophers, medical workers and lawyers, while sociologists were noticeably absent, until the late 90-ties. Why?

2a. Reasons for the distancing of Sociologists:

Sociologists themselves emphasize three reasons, of which two are subjective and the third is "objective".

- I. Bioethicists have been distant from social sciences from the beginning, they were in a "cocoon", and unfavorable to view-points of sociologists which are implicate critical.²
- II. Sociologists themselves were not willing to get involved with bioethics, because from the beginning they believed it belonged to physicians, theologians, philosophers and lawyers, and not to them considered as "sociable".

² The American sociologist from St. Olaf College and one of the founders of Sociology of Bioethics, Raymond DeVries, who was also reluctantly allowed to sit with his fellow American bioethicists on their committees and in one situation also asked to hand in his text before announcing anything on their committee and bioethics, has a very interesting personal experience on this matter, (see: Raymond De Vries, Janardan Subedi, Bioethics and Society, Prentice Hall, 1998.)



III. Different approaches in researching medicine: medicine is interesting to sociologists as it is in reality, and to bioethicists-according to the beliefs of sociologists-as it should be. In principle sociologists withdraw from explicit moral judgments, making an effort to make their discipline more descriptive, while bioethicists think of their discipline as prescriptive, that is, that its main purpose is moral valuation. These internal differences were not overcome but were made more deep, which lead to a distancing of sociology from bioethics and vice versa all through to the late 90-ties.

Yet, my opinion is that there exists a IVth reason: the wrong estimate of sociologists character and significance of bioethics in the new era. They were simply bewildered with its appearance and seduced by the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity of bioethics which was perceived to be its weakness, and not advantage in confront to the traditional comprehension of scientific branches and disciplines. Only when bioethics affirmed itself as a prestigious science of the new age, which not only caught up with, but according to certain elements, surpassed the hundred years older sociology (two encyclopedias, numerous books, periodicals, newsletters, institutes, centers and departments, postgraduate studies and doctorates, professionalization, institutionalization (ethical committees, offices, boards and commissions) international, regional and national associations of bioethicists, their world, continental and national congresses, conferentions, round tables etc.) did sociologists begin to show their professional interest for bioethics and the "self-proclaimed bioethicists" which became more wanted than them. Hereby was present a mixture of professional jealousy which encouraged undervaluation and suspicion, and finally transformed into critical consideration and cooperation offering and the formation of a special sociology discipline for bioethics-*Sociology of Bioethics* which is being lectured for the last couple of years on some American universities.³

³ Among the first were the University of Miami in Ohio and St. Olaf College in Minnesota.

2b The Reasons of the Bonding of Sociology and Bioethics

Sociologists quote the principle reason for the bonding of sociology and bioethics, their wish to help bioethics reject its weaknesses which drag them behind instead ahead and due to which it stagnates and still doesn't have conceptual foundation and "wanders above reality" in its fictive and abstract constructions. They consider that bioethics evidently needs sociology.

Therefore, the reason would be speaking in context of the four principal bioethical principles—the principle of beneficence.

I would like to add that there exists a worthy sociological reason that sociologists themselves quote, and it is that bioethics has become a widely acknowledged social fact opposite to which social sciences should be determined, specially sociology as a basic social science. Bioethics is, namely, unstoppable in moving ahead, with or without sociology, with its handicaps and weaknesses.

Clearly there is also a psychological reason which is, I should say, "the competitive envy of sociologists", due to the unexpected prestige of something which is "neither here nor there" but successfully competes with sociology.

Finally, the opinion of Raymond DeVries should be quoted, who claims that bioethics has primarily aroused the interest of medical sociologists, which have already had certain experiences with sociological-medical researches outside America, and were aware that in other societies exist different views of ethical issues in medicine from those interceded by American bioethicists. They were most bothered by the fact that in America only certain ethical problems are being stressed while others are suppressed and neglected, therefore bioethics doesn't aspire, like sociology, for "wholesome and complete" observation of issues it deals with, but satisfies itself with fragmentary approaches.

2c How was Sociology of Bioethics established

The first sociological researches of bioethics began in the first half of the 90-ties thanks to the American sociologist from Pennsylvania, Renee Fox, which is today considered to be "the pioneer of sociology of bioethics". Around him formed a group of critics of bioethics and bioethicists themselves which, besides medical workers, philosophers, theologians and ethnographers, also included sociologists. Yet, only when sociologist Raymond DeVries from the University of Minnesota, began in 1996. to lead this group towards a more complex sociological research of

bioethics and together with his colleague from Ohio, Janard Subedi in 1998. collected essays on bioethics written by the above mentioned group and other authors and issued them in their anthology, was *Sociology of Bioethics* founded. The book in question is *BIOETHICS AND SOCIETY* which was printed by Prentice-Hall in 1998. DeVries and Fox were the first to name this discipline and began to lecture it on their universities. This year⁴ they are planning to organize the First International Seminar on Sociology of Bioethics which is to be held for about 20 days in Nashville.⁵

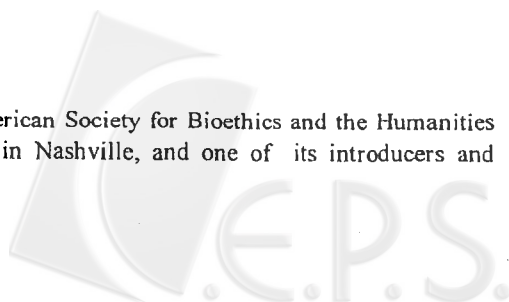
2d What are the contents of the first book on Sociology of Bioethics and what is its significance for this new academic discipline?

The editors of the mentioned book, DeVries and Subedi, emphasize that it "opens a new chapter regarding the relationship of bioethics and social sciences", that "this is the beginning of a methodical study of bioethics and its role in modern society" and that it represents "the first step to sociology of bioethics". According to their beliefs, the authors of the book-and there are 22 and not all of them are sociologists, but also philosophers, anthropologists, politologists, medical nurses, historians and lawyers-had a task to answer questions of where, how and when bioethics was born, who are bioethicists, how did they become bioethicists, what are their activities and their stand-points. Then, which tendencies became characteristic for the development of present day bioethics and what is its future, how is bioethics organized and how are bioethical decisions made. The task of the book was to introduce to the reader the primary characteristics of bioethics in other countries, for example in China.

To which extent did the authors of this essay answer to all these questions is a matter of particular analysis, but a certain discrepancy can be caught at first sight, between the given frames of the book of which its editors speak, and essay subjects, and the following subjects are: *the genesis of*

⁴ The author has in mind the year 2000.

⁵ The seminar was held on the 4th Annual Conference of the American Society for Bioethics and the Humanities (ASBH) 25.- 28.10. 2001. in the Renaissance Nashville Hotel in Nashville, and one of its introducers and chairmen was the author himself.



bioethical evolution; the comprehensive concept of bioethics and its problematic; values on which bioethics depends; arguments made by bioethicists and facts which are cited by founders of bioethics and its influential individuals, the institutionalization of bioethics, professionalism and bioethicists influence on medicine.

Still, I have the impression that this book was written primarily owing to the editorial ambition of DeVries, whose wish was to collect manuscripts enclosed in one cover which could be relevant to sociology of bioethics, and not as a result of a concrete research group which ahead of itself had a clear goal and formerly defined issues which would then be researched. The book is in fact a collection of insufficiently tied work collected by editors, readapted and given sociological-bioethical meaning, and not a consistent sociological creation.

But, if we take into consideration the review of the editor claiming it speaks of the first steps towards sociology of bioethics and the beginning of its systematic sociological research, then the mentioned weakness could be slightly tolerated and the claim that with it sociology of bioethics was truly founded, taken into account.

3. What resents do Sociologists have for Bioethicists and what do they see as their contribution to the future development of Bioethics?

The basic resent of sociologists, from which they then deduce all others, is that bioethicists do not recognize social, cultural and historical moments which influenced the birth of bioethics and influences on their thoughts on bioethics. They attribute bioethicists with "inborn conservatism", "blindness", "shortsightedness" and "sociological indifference" and reproach them as being "loudspeakers of medicine" and its "comforters", and not scientists which stand at a distance from their subject.

The pioneers of this new sociological discipline-*sociology of bioethics*-resent mostly, although themselves Americans, its "Americanization", which is obvious through the favoring of "autonomy" in confront to other 3 basic bioethical principles, specially in confront to the principal of justness. They call this "the triumph of autonomy in American bioethics" and criticize bioethicists that they have created "autonomy" the "most powerful" principle in American bioethics. They connect this to the main American characteristics where the freedom of an individual is traditionally the largest social value, which is then reflected on medicine, where issues such as abortion, euthanasia and refusal of treatment are principally approached from the autonomy stand-point of those immediately concerned.

The opinion of sociologists is that bioethicists "sail above" classes, cultures, social structures and other sociology categories and are losing themselves in "blind alleys" from which they will never emerge without the help of sociology. They say how it is astonishing that American bioethicists take no interest in economical and political conditions upon which the availability and level of health care in America depends, where for the function of the health system 1/7 of the national gross product is necessary, and at the same time 1/7 of the population does not have health insurance.

