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Does the principle of informed consent apply to futures studies research?

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ABSTRACT

Informed consent is a well-established practice in medical and behavioral research worldwide for both ethical and legal reasons (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986). Futures studies, while an eclectic multidisciplinary field, can reasonably be classified as primarily a social science and as such can involve human subjects in its research. Moreover much of the field is oriented toward applied, prescriptive pathways toward preferred futures that can involve influencing public policy and thus have significant social ramifications. This work investigates the extent to which futures studies research is involving human subjects, and, if so, whether informed consent practices are being applied to such futures studies research. The study proceeds to report the results of a poll of World Futures Studies Federation and Association of Professional Futurists members to gauge the nature of their research with emphasis on the use of human subjects and submission of proposed research to IRB evaluation. The piece concludes with a discussion on the expansion of the concept of informed consent to include engaging the public-at-large in the long-term effects of policy initiatives as a key element of the futures studies field and the representation of futures perspectives on institutional review boards particularly those involved in research on groups and communities.

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Preface

We don't know what we don't know. Immersed as we are in our cultures, ideologies and paradigms, we are forever under these influences while usually being unaware of them. The underlying perspectives for this work (at least as known to the author) are three:

My Masters degree specialization in international relations research methods honed and refined by a political science department at the University of Hawaii comprised mostly of faculty who attended Northwestern University; a prominent center of quantitative methods scholarship. That tradition rests on the Post-Enlightenment norm of rational systematic inquiry and is thus very much consistent with the "science" aspect of political science. Thus the developing, disseminating, analyzing and reporting of results of a survey questionnaire of individuals in the futures studies/foresight field is, to me, the proper approach and the right tool for this job.

There is also a recognition of the resonance within the philosophy of science of common kinship with every discipline that identifies with scientific values. Hence the collateral interest in bioethics and its influences on medical practice and research. It is there that my interest in informed consent and its expansion of application beyond the medical and behavioral sciences

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stems. It so happens that a contextual section of this article on the ongoing evolution of informed consent over the past 67 years that had to be cut here was published as part of a commentary in *American Journal of Bioethics Neuroscience*. This is thus hardly a matter of engaging in some kind of exotic transdisciplinary experimentation since many in the futures studies/foresight field tend to straddle disciplinary boundaries as a matter of course. Certainly the biological sciences are developing many paths to global transformation articulated within this piece and elsewhere and supported by more than a few futures thinkers.

Lastly is the belief that field of futures studies/foresight will benefit in stature and overall legitimacy in being informed by and informing the full range of academic and applied disciplines that are at the tip of the spear of societal transformation. Engagement through joint projects such in action research can be critical toward this end. Before engagement though comes dialog and hopefully accord on areas of common concern. This is a principal motivation behind the survey of the futures studies/foresight communities on the question of informed consent.

These themes are at the core of this work. It is thus this author's intent that these themes might move our ethical conceptualizations forward. If it falls short of this goal the responsibility is the author's alone.

1. Introduction

"Are you a medical doctor, or a mere academic?" Caption from a *New Yorker* cartoon, volume and number unknown

The interdisciplinary nature of the field of futures studies provides for a rich milieu of perspectives and unique methodologies (Gencler, 2010), but also presents challenges in how it might align its ethical standards within the field to scholarly and applied practice generally. Gauging overall adherence to ethical standards against other scholarly disciplines, while useful in a normative sense, may not be practical. This is because while it is associated with the social sciences, its methods of inquiry do not tend to conform standard methodologies such as surveys, database compilation and statistical analysis, or direct observation of human subjects. It does not lend itself to experimental models in which, say, a group is treated and then measured against a control group to compare and confirm or disconfirm differences attributed to the treatment. In short, futures studies is multidisciplinary, but with its temporal-forward orientation, has largely resorted to developing its own methodology, nominally augmented by quantitative and qualitative analysis. Findings from the clinical sciences, physical sciences, life sciences and engineering might be occasionally consulted, but their methods are not incorporated into the field. This is problematic because while futures studies is not in the business of predicting but in forecasting potential outcomes from decisions and technological impacts (Ciarli, Coad, & Rafols, 2013), this also is what much of clinical science is about in its measuring and modeling of treatment effects in such fields as pharmacology, epidemiology and public health generally.

Futures studies can yield useful empirical guidance toward understanding social processes in general and social transformation in particular. On the other hand, the work of visionary social theorists and philosophers can have enormous social impacts including adverse consequences as with the works of the social contract theorists (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau), Adam Smith, Social Darwinists, racial theorists, early generation eugenicists, Marx and Engels, and our more contemporary movement progenitors in the areas of racial, and gender equality and environmental advocacy. Applying some kind of informed consent protocols on the adoption of public policy agendas might seem absurd, but this is consistent with Dator's second law of futures studies (Dator, 2007).¹ The field produces a significant number of consultants to government and industry, indicating some influence on decision makers in policy and administrative arenas. One can also argue that the entire field of public policy analysis is a species of futures studies as the purpose of law making in general and public policy in particular is to create and guide a way to preferred futures Kuosa (2012). In this context, informed consent is integral, in the sense of decision makers constantly consulting with stakeholder groups so as to navigate a policy path through their interests (Coplin & O'Leary, 1976).

The field of futures studies, by virtue of its multidisciplinary nature, may include many experts who are not in the policy advisor or advocate roles and have formal careers in other fields including, but not confined to academia. It is possible that they perform futures related research that might involve human subjects. The extent and nature of the work by futures studies researchers involved in studies involving human subjects is one area of investigation here, but this study will also extend to assess the grasp of understanding informed consent by those in the field. The survey will focus on those in the field, both academic and consultant professionals, who do or have done futures research using human subjects in, for instance, role-playing simulations or gaming scenarios outside of the classroom context that could bring informed consent into play. It will also make a basic assessment of if and how those doing futures research are incorporating clinical or other human subjects research. Finally it will address, again in a cursory manner, respondent understandings of informed consent as conventionally conceived and practiced. The survey will serve to help verify the state of informed consent recognition and practices among futures studies researchers, and help serve as a point of departure on where informed consent is and might be poised to go within the field.

¹ For those unfamiliar with Dator's second law, it states, "Any useful idea about the futures should appear to be ridiculous."

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