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Paper title

Bioethical discourse in Latvia: women's voices, women's interests

Abstract

In the perception of a democratic society, discussions on the moral and political legitimacy of the scientifically technological development are most certainly included. It has been commonly accepted that political decisions should be made considering the interests and opinion of society. However, technologies and science are spheres in which society often does not feel knowledgeable enough to make judgments. There is no doubt that mass media play a big role in forming the opinions of lay people on science and modern technologies. As John Durant and Nicola Lindsey point out in their research on the influence of mass media on society (1999), even isolated statements in the press can significantly influence public debate and opinions.

Women have a long history of interest in healthcare issues that predates the comparatively recent resurgence of feminism. Bioethical issues affect women in profound ways because of how directly their bodies and roles are touched by them. Moreover, globally, women are more likely to be impoverished, and unable to access health care. Many new technologies are still in their infancy. Debate about them is just beginning. Now is the time for women to weigh in on these issues.

The aim of my study was to analyze the public bioethical discourse in the Latvian press between years 2002 and 2006 by means of content analysis of press.

A few results of the study:

In solving problems and dilemmas of ethics, the main importance lies in arguments; for this reason, close attention in this study has been paid to the analysis of argumentation. In analyzing the contents of the Latvian bioethical discourse, a common tendency emerges – often articles on biomedicine tend to be sensational, instead of presenting the arguments of different sides. Titles of the articles also show this by the use of vague, sensational language (such words as *miracle*, *secret*, *dream*, *immortality*). Such use of language is intended to create a dramatic effect. Instead of rationally considering various arguments, Latvian newspaper articles often exhibit so-called “yellow press” tendencies, creating unfounded hopes or, to the contrary, establishing a myth that the development of biomedicine is unmistakable evil.

If the involvement in the Latvian public discourse on bioethics is to be analyzed, a conclusion emerges that the scope of people and groups involved is rather small. The authors of articles are chiefly journalists with no special education in the sphere of medicine or bioethics. Articles by or interviews of scientists and physicians are rather infrequent. Even more uncommon are articles on the subject of bioethics which are written by philosophers. The weak activity of scientists in the involvement of public discourse on bioethics does not provide a connection between the public and the scientific discourse. The involvement of nongovernmental organizations in the debates on bioethics is of fragmentary nature.

In my presentation I will analyze how to open dialogue and interject feminist concerns into the dominant discourses and practices which define the norms of medical research and health care in Latvia; how to devise new strategies for introducing feminist standpoints into policymaking processes.

Biography

Signe Mezinska is lecturer at Riga Stradins University Department of Humanities and PhD Student at Riga Stradins University Doctoral study program in Social Sciences.

Main research interests:

- bioethics
- illness narratives
- lay experiences of health and illness

Topics of research projects:

- PhD theme: *The lay concept of illness and its significance in doctor-patient relationships*
- researcher in project *Health and Assessment of Health Behavior in Latvia* (Riga Stradins University)
- researcher in project *Quality of life in Latvia*. (University of Latvia, Advanced Institute of Social and Political Research, Strategic Analysis Commission Under the Auspices of the President of the Republic of Latvia)

Institutional Affiliation Riga Stradins University Latvia