

## Summary from July 26, 2021, Global Neuroethics Integration Round Table

*Prepared by Zone Li*

The second small neuroethics round-table meeting was hosted on July 26, 2021. Our conversation was driven by key questions from our larger [Neuroethics Integration meeting held on Feb 2, 2021](#). Our conversation was meant to explore insights on barriers, challenges, and strategies to integrate humanistic methodologies most effectively into the enterprise of neuroscience. We also hoped to discuss whether “integration” is truly valuable and viable.

To kick off the meeting we asked participants to list one curiosity for this roundtable. These curiosities revolved around notions of interdisciplinarity, communication, and practical implications of drawing distinctions across disciplines. One participant even posed whether “neuroethics’ drive to “ally” itself to neuroscience (the integration concern) may not have become an obstacle to a fuller blooming of the discipline.” Another asked, “why has this [neuroscience and humanities integration] conversation not moved in 10/15/20 years?”

Curiosities described by participants included:	
<b>Interdisciplinarity</b>	
•	Should we even *still* be worried about neuroethics integration?
•	What is the priority when integrating with neuroscience? What is the most important thing to communicate when doing so?
•	How to overcome interdisciplinary boundaries, particularly with insights from the social sciences?
<b>Communication</b>	
•	How to best facilitate communication between ethicists and neuroethicists?
•	How do we effectively communicate neuroethics ideals to those in other disciplines? Could the current terminology be an obstacle to clear understanding?
<b>Drawing distinctions</b>	
•	From a funding perspective: is there a difference in perspective on bioethics and ethics? Is this a useful way of thinking to understand and facilitate integration?
•	Could the idea of integration be a hindrance to the development of neuroethics?



Next, participants discussed challenges they have faced when trying to integrate a social sciences/humanities perspective with neuroscience and how they overcame them if they did.

These challenges included barriers associated with narrow conceptualization of ethics and neuroethics as well as asymmetric valuations of sources of knowledge. Some of the challenges point toward structural and systemic barriers. In particular, the challenges associated with a predominantly western school of thought was seen as constraining robust discourse in social implications of science. It was noted that much of bioethics discourse grows is anchored in 18<sup>th</sup> century Western traditions and views of patient autonomy and other ethical concepts. Yet, ethical traditions are informed by local histories and contexts. A narrow approach to ethics may lead to blind spots of where and how ethical issues can arise with emerging technology. [EU Bionet](#) was noted as an example of an EU and China collaboration around reproductive ethics that was deliberate in acknowledging culture around ethically fraught issues.

In addition, an epistemic hierarchy where neuroscience is viewed as superior to humanistic inquiry is evinced by funding inequalities. This view is likely promoted by political and economic actors who very carefully build and advance this hierarchy. Such inequalities put humanistic inquiry as secondary or at risk of being in-service of science rather than allowing for unconstrained and scoped research directions and scholarship. As perhaps a natural result, even lower representation of neuroscience related research has been seen at large international professional society meetings such as the [Society for Social Studies of Science \(4S\)](#). [Participants wondered if neuroscience was still interesting, relevant, or even continued to offer prestige as an area of inquiry to social scientists.](#)

The epistemic hierarchy is systemic and structural. For example, the [GDPR](#) has prompted scientists to seek research ethics expertise which in this case is framed in meeting compliance needs, rather than broader humanistic inquiry. It is likely not just scientists who promote this compliance-oriented view. Arguably, participants noted, that ethicists may have also sought out regulatory identities and roles to their professional and financial benefit. Further, the scientific enterprise is dominated historical by western scientists. Similarly, humanistic inquiry in and of science has often failed to consider cultural dimensions across and within cultures.



Even the outputs of humanistic inquiry of the sciences feel compelled to publish in English in journals. Translation of ethical discourse, particularly to English may impoverish and homogenize meaning and conceptual translation.

Challenges with interdisciplinary and cultural integration:	
<b>Narrow conceptualization</b>	
•	Ethics may be viewed as restricting/as a roadblock by scientists. Some ethicists also contribute to this narrow regulatory/compliance role.
•	The concepts of bioethics and ethics come from a primarily Western school of thought focusing on the individual.
•	Translating neuroethics concepts across cultures and languages is a challenge and rarely done.
<b>Asymmetric valuation</b>	
•	Institutional dismissal of humanities as unimportant is a barrier leading to funding inequalities across disciplines and knowledge valuation.
•	Disciplines outside of neuroscience spend a lot of time understanding neuroscience, but the reverse is rarely seen (yet there may be a waning interest of humanists in the neurosciences)
<b>Structural/Systemic</b>	
•	Science is structurally organized to bring in ethicists in a compliance function (e.g., RCR, GDPR)
•	Many countries, such as China, entered the global organization of science which had firmly established an inherently western way of thinking about science. There is a push to standardize and ask questions across cultures without considering the differences among societies.
•	Most "prestigious" journals are published in English. Certain elements of understanding can be lost in translation.

Some strategies for overcoming these challenges including addressing structural issues, particularly those intimately tied to funding. Some participants suggested that ethics work within a large brain project may limit scope of work possible and result in no more than ethics 'varnish' or ethics discussions that are subservient to the goals of the project. An official role within a large interdisciplinary project may mean the ethicist is only permitted to interrogate issues from the perspective of their assigned role rather than exploring fundamental issues

about the project itself for example. Funding is also seen as a powerful lever for establishing and empowering integrative/interdisciplinary work (e.g., Wellcome Trust and medical humanities). Current interdisciplinary and integrative humanities and neuroscience work would benefit from recognizing and addressing its inherent Western conceptual bias. Potential opportunities to expand the impact and reach of work in neuroethics included developing venues for extensive international exchange. Some participants suggested pictograms, or a-textual narratives/representations that translate neuroethics issues. Finally, our participants highlighted the need to consider a possible resetting of expectations and goals for interdisciplinarity and integration. Some participants questioned whether integration should really be a desirable goal. Alternatively, it might be the case that integration is most effective at the individual level or at a small-group level, rather than at the high level of a discipline. Future directions for neuroethics integration could include and emphasis on more foresight (rather than regulation) as well as including more globally relevant issues around equality and justice and specific issues around poverty and racism. It's important to note that many countries, do not have or cannot afford a large-scale brain research project.

Strategies:
<b>Address structural constraints</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Funding can create entire integrative programs.</li> <li>Create independence for reflection and thinking around fundamental issues.</li> </ul>
<b>Recognize Western conceptual bias</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intentionally offer venues for extensive exchange of ideas and best practices between countries (i.e., projects such as <a href="#">EU Bionet</a>)</li> <li>Move beyond text base discussions of neuroethics.</li> </ul>
<b>Reset expectations and goals</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be critical of the 'interdisciplinary imperative'.</li> <li>Explore whether integration might best occur at the individual level or at the level of small groups rather than as an integration of fields (or maybe whether integration is desirable at all).</li> <li>Orient ethics beyond regulation and instead imagining the future and future impacts. Considering the future impact of neuroscientific and neuroethics research is a part of the process of integration.</li> </ul>





<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Expand research to topics that will affect global issues and political thinking such as poverty, equality, and racism.</li></ul>
<b>Learn from exemplars</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Medical Humanities, History of Science, and STS. E.g., Medical humanities, humanities have been able to integrate into science curricular and research</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Data ethicists have been able to maintain intellectual freedom from scientists while cultivating deep knowledge of the data sciences</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Black in Neuro (i.e., discusses how neuroscience can be integrated as an anti-racist project)</li></ul>

In the discussion of strategy, several exemplars were suggested. For example, the medical humanities, anthropology, history of science, and science, technology, and society (STS) as fields have often successfully integrated into science curricula and research. Data ethicists were another group who have become deeply aware of the state of data science while still maintaining intellectual independence from the field of data science. Further data ethicists, considering big data endeavors, are adept at thinking of globally relevant scales. [Black In Neuro](#) was mentioned as an exemplar of integrating humanistic issues into neuroscience, where neuroscience can be pursued as an anti-racist project. The neurosciences in general have an opportunity to engage with issues of politics more deeply, poverty, equality, racism that will truly having effects (and relevance) at the global level. Neuroethicists should as well.

The value of distancing one's work from ethics was also discussed. Some participants were very explicit about their work not being 'ethics' (e.g., not necessarily regulatory or normative and that the work is empirically driven) or even distancing one's work from the term 'ethics'. Finally, integration should not be solely focused on neurosciences, but should also consider their role in the humanities or other fields of study. Neuroethics might be enriched by connecting with the medical humanities, STS scholars, anthropologists, political scientists, and economists to name a few.

