Zooming in on Justice: The Case for Virtual Bioethics Conferencing

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Zooming in on Justice: The Case for Virtual Bioethics Conferencing

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In their target article, "Proposed Principles for International Bioethics Conferencing: Anti-Discriminatory, Global, and Inclusive," Jecker et al. (2024) highlight the growing international scope of bioethics and the corresponding challenges of doing bioethics ethically. Their particular concern is the ethics of international bioethics conferencing, and their goal is to initiate a discussion about what an ethics framework for this context should look like.

The authors propose three broad ethical themes—anti-discrimination, global awareness, and inclusiveness—and outline seven ethical principles derived from these themes for use in international bioethics conference planning, for issues, such as site and speaker selection. As a case study, they consider the choice of Qatar for the 2024 World Congress of Bioethics and express concern that Islamophobia may have been a factor in some of the vocal opposition to this decision. The authors hope their ethical framework will lead to better judgments in international conference planning and help to dismantle Islamophobia in the field of bioethics.

For the purposes of discussion, we accept the authors' ethical themes and principles as a framework for evaluating the ethics of international bioethics conferencing. Although we acknowledge that Islamophobia is an important issue in international bioethics, we see this as an instance of a broader tendency in bioethics to disregard religious beliefs and values (Fox and Swazey 2010). This tendency itself is just one of many possible grounds for discrimination that we should be aiming to dismantle.

In our view, the authors' seven principles for international bioethics conference site selection suggest an obvious solution—eliminating in-person conferencing in favor of virtual conferencing. As we will show, the advantages are significant and they far outweigh the limitations. The burden of benefits is such that

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researchers—and perhaps especially bioethicists—may even be morally obliged to do so, which will be especially challenging because many academics still prefer face-to-face conferences (Engelbrecht et al. 2023; Medina and Shrum 2022).

The first theme that Jecker et al. identify is anti-discrimination, which they describe as fairness to "geographically and culturally diverse groups." In their view, this means actively selecting sites that make it easier for more marginalized groups to attend, such as Qatar. Virtual conferencing goes much further in this regard—it dramatically reduces cost and avoids the complications of visas, which can be considerably more difficult for those with certain nationalities to obtain. *Any* geographic location will necessarily make it more difficult for those who are further away to attend—even Qatar is a considerable journey from many African, Asian, and South American countries. Virtual conferencing eliminates any travel barriers. As Jecker et al. believe that being fair is "morally mandatory," this implies that in-person conferences should be avoided. Of course, there are still language and time zone barriers that need to be addressed, but these remain problems in varying degrees irrespective of the type of conferencing adopted.

The authors' second theme is global awareness, which is set forth by holding conferences in diverse locations around the world and by minimizing their carbon footprint. As virtual conferencing does not involve a physical location *per se* (a company must host it but, in the spirit of fairness, this need not be limited to Western video conferencing companies such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams), it does not contribute to global awareness via the diversity of its locations, but as we have noted, it removes travel barriers. This enables far greater diversity (e.g., ethnicity and sex) among attendees and significantly higher attendance as a consequence of its lower costs (Skiles et al. 2021). In-person bioethics conferences are also far more likely to involve a less diverse and lower number of submissions and attendees. Virtual conferencing is also clearly a more green option than in-person conferencing. Participants who utilize air travel will generate a significant carbon footprint, which is added to by local transport, accommodation, and the printing of single-use conference materials (Leochico, Di Giusto, and Mitre 2021). Whilst compromises could be made by considering multisite, regional conferencing so that delegates have less distance to travel, the greatest net benefit and reduction in greenhouse gas emissions is achieved through fully virtual conferencing (Ewijk and Hoekman 2021).

The authors' third theme is inclusivity and we particularly want to emphasize the principle that states we should "leave no one behind." We agree with the authors that certain countries and regions have been historically excluded from much of mainstream bioethics. They suggest offering bursary support or other accommodations for persons to be able to attend in-person conferences. However, this would aid only a limited number of persons for events where the organizers chose to offer this option. For an international conference, the cost barriers associated with travel and lodging—on top of high registration fees—are significant. Travel and presentation at global conferences are cost-prohibitive to many researchers, perhaps more so to those from marginalized groups, graduate students, junior faculty, and persons from low- or middle-income countries (Arend and Bruijns 2019). Greatly reducing the cost barrier via virtual conferencing would further the principle of inclusivity proposal by setting a more level playing field. The increased opportunity for participation would have distinct benefits for graduate students and early career researchers who are the groups most likely to benefit from its inherent career advancement opportunities; for example, networking and meeting more experienced academics would increase the likelihood of developing collaborative partnerships. Virtual conferencing could also more readily solicit a planning committee composed of persons from different regions of the world and differing backgrounds—helping to promote viewpoint diversity by exposing people to a broader range of ideas and perspectives.

In-person conferences also present significant barriers to several other groups. For example, academics who are sole carers for young children are often unable to commit to a conference that may take several days, including travel. Moreover, long-distance travel can be especially challenging for disabled and neurodiverse academics, making it more difficult to access conferences where they can promote their scholarship. Despite some limitations, virtual conferencing enables both of these groups to be more easily included.

Jecker et al. also emphasizes that academic conferences should be a free exchange of ideas: "a safe space for people and groups not at liberty to debate controversial topics in their respective countries" (Jecker et al (2024). Even if such people and groups can attend in-person conferences outside their own countries, it may not be safe for them to debate controversial topics there. Although the authors are unaware of virtual conferences that offer anonymous participation, there are no significant technical barriers to doing so,

and it should be straightforward to implement for those who require it.

Finally, Jecker et al. believe that epistemic justice requires that knowledge production be available to bioethicists in non-Western countries, in the form of hosting conferences in their regions and showcasing their local academics. While scheduling conferences exclusively in these regions will go some way to addressing the current imbalances, we have already noted that there are non-Western countries around the world. Consequently, a conference in Africa will restrict the participation of bioethicists in South America, Asia, and so on. Further, virtual conferences are less expensive to organize and host, allowing the involvement of universities that may not be able to afford to run in-person conferencing. Virtual conferencing therefore makes attaining epistemic justice more feasible.

Academic conferences are a fundamental venue to share knowledge, be exposed to a multitude of ideas and viewpoints, and network with persons in one's field. Some may argue that the networking and social aspects of conferencing that often occur outside regular programming are essential features of conferencing that cannot be replicated to the same degree in a virtual environment. We agree that face-to-face interactions have significant benefits over virtual conferencing that are unlikely to be replaced, and we certainly prefer attending conferences in-person ourselves. Yet, if we accept Jecker et al.'s themes of anti-discrimination, global awareness, and inclusivity as a basis for an ethical framework for international bioethics conferencing, they provide a strong moral case in favor of virtual conferencing. If conference organizers accept this position, they must think creatively to develop strategies that facilitate digital networking connections, such as utilizing digital discussion forums and more immersive experiences, such as virtual reality (Sarabipour et al. 2021). If an obligation to move toward virtual conferencing is rejected, conference organizers must propose an alternative ethical framework for conferencing that avoids the implications of Jecker et al.'s framework. Personal preference is not a sufficiently weighty reason to continue organizing in-person bioethics conferences.

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