Ethics in a Global Society

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Title: Examining the Social Ethics of Artificial Intelligence in Healthcare

Assignment #3 – Essay

1. Write a 5-page essay that analyzes a topic in ethics relevant to your research interests, professional growth, and as an interdisciplinary faith-learning scholar. The essay must show scholarly work and cover the subject well.

2. Paper Outline

a. Begin with an introductory paragraph that has a succinct thesis statement.

b. Address the topic of the paper with critical thought.

c. End with a conclusion that reaffirms your thesis.

d. Use a minimum of eleven scholarly research sources (two books and the remaining scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles).

**Introduction**

Healthcare Artificial Intelligence (AI) has inherent ethical issues due to the injection into the interpersonal connection between practitioners and patients. For our healthcare system to be ethically sound in the era of healthcare AI, humans must not submit our human autonomy to AI.

Technological advancements have been a major factor in the improvement of healthcare, from new surgical tools to advancement in the understanding of the functioning of the body to the advancement of understanding of diseases. With the modern period of the development of computing technology, healthcare technology has had an exponential growth in the way healthcare is delivered and the technology tools used by healthcare practitioners to help serve their patients. However, it does seem that technology is becoming more advanced and that technology has outpaced our general understanding and ethical considerations (Mackintosh & Armstrong, 2020).

This is particularly the case with Artificial Intelligence in general and particularly healthcare AI. For, “…there is an urgent need to define and address the opportunities, challenges, and practical implications of using AI and robotics in healthcare” (De Togni et al., 2024, p.2009). Ethical concerns surrounding technology have not always been appreciated or considered. When technology is introduced into society, it changes society and the people within society, their decisions and actions, which have moral implications for the individual and society. This paper examines the social-ethical concerns surrounding healthcare AI and proposes a way in which we could navigate into ethical healthcare AI. The major factor for society navigating the use of AI and its ethical implications is to maintain our human autonomy over AI machines.

**The New Reality of AI**

The term Artificial Intelligence or AI is applied generally to computing technology that utilizes large amounts of data in order to see correlations and then utilize the correlational knowledge to make decisions, almost like real intelligence, but it is an artificial understanding hence the term Artificial Intelligence. As of current we are in the functional stage of narrow AI or weak AI, which can perform narrowly defined tasks. The theoretical AI that is being sought is general AI or strong AI, which could perform on par with human intelligence capabilities, and then super AI or artificial superintelligence which could outperform human intelligence capabilities. Some estimate that general AI will be functional sometime in the late 2020’s.

The drive for new technological advances seems to be an unavoidable drive for humanity, and with AI being thought to be the ‘greatest technological advancement ever’, there is no turning back from the pursuit of making the theoretical AI into a reality, thus as humanity, we will be facing the reality of general AI and artificial superintelligence in the near future whether we are ready or not.

**Healthcare AI and Ethical Considerations**

AI is thought to be prime for healthcare due to the rich data it could use from Electronic Health Records (EHR) and the ways it could assist in supporting practitioners with diagnosis and treatment decisions. However, there are concerns with healthcare AI, “In a recent study, when asked about the future of AI in primary care, while acknowledging its potential benefits, most practitioners were extremely skeptical regarding it playing a significant role in the future of the profession. One main pain point refers to the lack of empathy and the ethical dilemma that can occur between AI and patients” (Bohr & Memarzadeh, 2020, p. 56). This brings up the point about the need for cooperation within integrating AI into healthcare, the technology corporations should not be the main driving force of putting to work AI in healthcare. Healthcare providers and staff need to inform technology corporations what they would like healthcare AI to be able to do. Healthcare professionals have a concern that uninformed AI technology corporations may create healthcare AI technologies that would have a negative effect on caregiver and patient relationships, with a reduction of provider-patient interactions of the human touch (Palmer & Schwan, 2024, p.121). This is a major concern where developers and technology corporations do not have ethical considerations at the forefront of their AI development nor have ethical training as part of their education process or business practices (McLennan et al., 2022).

The ethical considerations surrounding healthcare AI are in summary about; patient privacy, data, bias, the unknown of AI decisions (black box), lack of human connection, non-individual patient treatment, integrating ethical reasoning in AI, the balance between life and death, and autonomy. There may be many detailed ethical circumstances surrounding healthcare AI, but it would generally fall within the above categories. Ethics and morals, in essence, are about human connection and the interaction between human agents doing good toward each other, based on the understanding of human value as social moral agents and a general empathy for humankind. However, with AI the artificial distinction is a major one, **“**AI is thought to lack the ability to act empathetically” (Benzinger et al., 2023, p.6). This distinction should be held at the forefront of the development and use of healthcare AI.

**Social Impacts and Social Ethics**

Sociology is the social scientific study of society, culture, social structure, and social phenomena. It is important for public and academic sociologists to be involved in research and publication about the phenomenon of AI and, moreover, the ethics of AI because not only does technology change society, but the ethical and moral conditions of people transform society. There are discussions about the need for AI developers, technology companies, and governments to work together in figuring out the ethical frameworks of AI, but no one really has a deep enough understanding of the technology, the social impacts, and the ethical impacts of AI. This is why it is so vital for sociologists to be involved, and in particular, the sociology of ethics, “The sociology of morality examines how moral systems are constructed, understood, and adopted by societies, organizations, and individuals” (Avnoon et al., 2024, p. 5964), in order to help stakeholders understand the social and ethical issues surrounding AI based on social research.

Currently the drive of technologists to bring into functional reality general AI and artificial superintelligence is for technology's sake and are the ones driving the social change without much consideration for the impacts of social change and the ethical implications of AI and given that “AI ethics must be developed consistently. AI has no cultural or ethical background. Data and the representation of information are always required to feed an AI system” (Khogali & Mekid, 2023, p.73). There really needs to be a shift in developing AI; as part of the development process, political leaders, government leaders, business, academic, and healthcare leaders need to be involved to help guide the development of AI. This will allow a larger social perspective to influence the positive aspects of AI and reduce the negative impacts.

In the scope of healthcare AI technology, it lags behind other applications of AI, which is good because the AI models need to be at a higher level of functioning and accuracy since they deal with the realm of people's health and life. Therefore, we may be able to see how social changes and ethical implications are happening in the other applications of AI and apply that to forecasting how healthcare AI will change society in general and its ethical impacts. From what we see in general social changes, the use of AI is a tool that enhances the user’s ability to perform tasks, such as writing, organizing, and making sense of complex data. This brings about more efficiencies for the user, such as a practitioner being able to use AI technology to work with electronic health records systems; this may allow the practitioner to spend face-to-face time with the patient. This has been a problem since the arrival of the electronic health records system, in which practitioners have spent much of their time away from patients as they spent time doing data entry into the EHR.

Unfortunately, it may be that the efficiencies of healthcare AI will not bring about more patient-provider contact, both may seek less personal contact where they will want to communicate via smart devices, with patients seeking quick fixes to their health issues and providers may rely more and more on healthcare AI to recommend treatment and communicate with the patient. In addition, the use of wearable technology may also limit face-to-face contact with practitioners, where people will be able to get healthcare insight through their AI wearables and modify their behavior or seek self-treatment solutions to what AI suggests, as opposed to patient and provider working through the treatment solution together with human connection.

With this reduction of human autonomy to AI will cause social change in ways we have not seen before, where, in essence, our behavior becomes molded to how AI wants us to behave rather than humans modifying AI behavior to fit human behavior. Even though AI lacks transparency which makes accountability problematic (Morley et al., 2020), humans will assume that AI will be superior to human reason and action. There will also be a shift in human ethical systems (human to human) to an AI-generated ethical system that will be about how humans treat AI and this will carry over to how humans will treat other humans, thus giving AI equal moral worth with humans. So, when healthcare and ethical decisions are made, AI will make the decisions, and practitioners and patients will abide by its moral calculation by submitting their human autonomy to AI autonomy.

**Recommendations**

From the perspective of the sociology of healthcare ethics, a few recommendations are made in order to minimize the negative social-ethical impacts of healthcare AI on practitioners, patients, and the larger society. 1) Health professionals and patients need to be incorporated into the healthcare AI development process, in order to provide sound healthcare inputs into healthcare AI. 2) A healthcare system understanding and reinforcement of human autonomy over AI. 3) An audio prompt from AI to healthcare practitioners that AI is a tool to assist practitioners, but as healthcare professionals’ healthcare decisions are yours. 4) Healthcare AI to provide visual and narrative cues and summaries of findings and reasonings to the healthcare practitioner. 5) Have healthcare AI measure provider-patient time and collaboration and provide reports to providers and healthcare facilities. 6) Have Healthcare AI perform audits on its work and recommendations and implement a system of human audits of healthcare AI. These recommendations are aimed at ensuring a system of reflexivity in healthcare (Cribb, 2020), that would support the provider-patient interpersonal relationship and the promotion of human autonomy over healthcare AI.

**Conclusion**

Sociological research into the social-ethical concerns surrounding healthcare AI needs to be a priority for sociologists, which can provide stakeholders, the healthcare community, and the public valuable social and ethical insight to use to frame, analyze, and manage healthcare AI ethical concerns (Gabe & Monaghan, 2022). Along with the healthcare system implementing such recommendations as incorporating health professionals and patients in the development of healthcare AI, healthcare to reinforce human autonomy over AI, AI prompts to providers to ensure human decisions, AI visual and narrative cues and summaries for healthcare practitioners, AI measures of provider-patient time, and healthcare AI and human audits of healthcare AI. Such recommendations will ensure minimal negative effects of healthcare AI on healthcare and the social and ethical in the realm of healthcare. Also to foremost protect human autonomy from healthcare AI and the human willingness to forgo their autonomy to healthcare AI, which will allow humanity to have control over ethical decisions while using healthcare AI.

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