

Summer 1 Report (Research Project and Personal Development)

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Introduction

My research consisted of a critical examination of the compatibility of transformative medical procedures and the act of giving informed consent. In lay terms, transformative experiences are experiences which we cannot fully conceptualize prior to actually experiencing them, and which personally transform us, usually through a change in values. On paper, these special features of transformative experience (their epistemic and personally transformative aspects) make them seemingly impossible to give informed consent to. However, transformative medical procedures are increasingly common in medicine, raising urgent ethical questions as to whether patients are properly aware of the procedures they are undergoing.

I was supervised by Dr. Farbod Akhlaghi at Trinity's School of Philosophy, one of the most cited authors on the topic of transformative experience, and funded by the Laidlaw Foundation.

This reflective report consists of two parts. It will first address the research itself: the methodologies I used, the findings of my research, and possible further steps. The second part consists of a personal reflection: how the research progressed as compared to my expectations, particular challenges I faced, particular successes, the opportunity to collaborate with my supervisor, and my leadership growth over the summer.

Part I: Research

Methodology and Research Process

Philosophical research is different to other fields in that its research methods are typically more abstract. Typically, there is little, if any, quantitative aspect to the work. Instead, conceptual analysis is the main tool used by philosophers: examining a concept/idea through multiple lenses to see if a new insight can resolve some existing problem. This process almost invariably involves literature review to understand which lenses have been previously applied and what the current stance on issues are.

Early on, I discussed incorporating a quantitative aspect to my research with Dr. Akhlaghi, as there is some precedent in more application-oriented philosophical work, including some of the literature I reference (Villiger, 2024). However, I was advised to pursue a more conceptual approach to avoid creating too large of a research scope.

Therefore, I began by creating a reading list on the topic with input from Dr. Akhlaghi - particular areas of focus were classical bioethics works by Beauchamp and Childress and the seminal text on transformative experience authored by L.A. Paul. I also had the chance to discuss Dr. Akhlaghi's own paper on transformative experience with him, which was particularly relevant to ethics-related application. The intention overall was to form a solid understanding of how informed consent is typically understood in bioethics at large and then to focus on its application to transformative experience. This process of focusing was particularly important, as the exact definition of informed consent is relatively contentious and unsettled.

From this broader reading list, I began my second week of research by reviewing literature dealing with my area of research specifically: informed consent to transformative procedures. Much of the literature (Smith and Sisti 2020; Jacobs 2023; Egerton and Capitelli-McMahon 2023; Villiger 2024; Kopeikin 2025) focused on psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy as a paradigm example of a transformative medical procedure. Although this was often a helpful example in which to situate discussion, I decided with Dr. Akhlaghi's approval to approach the topic of transformative medical procedures as a whole.

After these readings, I began the iterative process of writing a research paper articulating my perspective on the issue at hand. The ideal goal of this paper would be the creation of a novel and significant contribution to the discussion on transformative medical procedures, one that responded to other researchers' points and either refuted or built off of them.

Ultimately, I created two roughly 15 page papers on the topic, which had different arguments and final findings.

The initial paper was completed at the end of Week 3, and attempted to redefine the typical understanding of informed consent. It utilized an approach common to philosophy, in which a seeming contradiction in concepts is resolved not by clarifying the newer, more controversial idea, but by re-examining the assumptions that created the contradiction in the first place. This paper argued that informed consent was best understood as a concept based on relational knowledge: that it is only a relevant medical standard if and only if the doctor and patient are in a situation where there is an imbalance of information and therefore power.

However, after discussing the paper with Dr. Akhlaghi, the approach of this paper was deemed too broad, as to rigorously defend a new definition of informed consent would be much longer of a task than was realistic.

As such, I reworked the successful part of the first paper into a second paper with a modified argument.

Final Findings

This second paper became my final findings for the research, and made the following argument (in brief):

Patients undergoing transformative experiences are indeed in a situation where their values are changing (personally transformative) and they cannot know what the procedure will be like (epistemically transformative). However, this second prong of the transformative challenge to informed consent exists in other non-transformative procedures. For example, a patient undergoing chemotherapy will not know what the procedure will be like, but will not necessarily be in a position where they will have a change in values. Importantly, patients' abilities to consent to these epistemically transformative procedures is not typically questioned. As such, a parity argument can be made regarding the epistemic challenge - that if patients can consent to chemotherapy (an experience they cannot truly conceptualize prior to the procedure) then they can consent to any transformative procedure.

This framing of the issue as a parity argument was novel to the literature, and is a relatively robust form of argument when parity is created with a strong premise (in this case, a patient's ability to give informed consent to chemotherapy).

Regarding the personally transformative aspect of transformative procedures, I made the argument that the literature falsely equated one's ability to make rational decisions with one's ability to make a value-aligned decision. I furthermore argued that Smith and Sisti's proposal of an enhanced informed consent requirement for transformative procedures adequately addressed concerns of a patient's changing values. Lastly, I made the novel argument that, when Akhlaghi's right to revelatory autonomy is considered, a denial of a transformative procedure to a patient would be a trespass of that right and would constitute stripping the patient of their decision-making capacity.

All of this argumentation required extensive defense against opposing viewpoints present in the literature. As such, the bulk of the final paper constituted defense of these arguments through rebuttals and responses. However, for the sake of brevity and clarity, these are omitted here.

Next Steps

Further steps to take in this research would be to refine the arguments made to ensure that all opposing arguments are addressed. At this point, the goal would be to publish the paper in some capacity, in order to truly contribute to the philosophical dialogue at hand.

Beyond this, if expanding the scope of research were possible, taking a policy or law approach to this issue would likely be fruitful. This was an approach I considered initially, before accepting that doing so would unnecessarily bloat the paper and not leave enough room for counter arguments.

However, examining whether hospital policy and medical liability law adequately accounts for transformative procedures would be the pathway to making this philosophical research actionable. Previous recommendations have been made in the literature by Smith and Sisti -

however, further research could be done considering how closely policy aligns with these recommendations 5 years later.

If I were to continue on this track, I would aim to reach out to researchers in related fields like Bioethics Law and Public Health. For example, Dr. Andrea Mulligan at Trinity works in bioethics laws, and I would love to reach out to her for feedback on my paper if I were to pursue publishing it.

Part II: Personal Reflection

Reflection on Original Proposal and Objectives

I think my final research was relatively close to my original proposal. I explored the topic as I predicted, and even stayed relatively close to the original project timeline.

However, I did depart from the proposal in terms of the results I came up with. I originally planned to more heavily incorporate Dr. Akhlaghi's research into my own, as I felt it would provide a novel way of approaching the issue. In my final work, I did incorporate Dr. Akhlaghi's paper - however, it was in a different way to how I originally planned, which was a more straightforward argument simply applying the right to revelatory autonomy to the issue. A similar argument had been made already in the literature by Kopeikin just a few months before, and so I decided to base more of my argument and response on Villiger.

Significant Challenges

The overarching challenge of the research was an issue inherent with much of philosophical work - that it is never truly finished. Valuable works of philosophy both contribute a novel perspective to the field and do an effective job addressing possible objections to the perspective. This process of defending one's contribution, especially for a contentious issue, can be never-ending, and as such I had a difficult time finding a satisfactory endpoint for the research. Given that there were no quantitative results which served as a concrete endpoint, it felt as if the paper was never done. New perspectives and defenses could always be contributed.

Probably the biggest challenge in this process occurred in the decision to pivot from my initial argument to my final argument. Much of the first half of my research became centered around making my argument regarding informed consent's definition - as such, to change my argument to one with a smaller scope, while wise, was difficult to do, as it required a long re-evaluation of the literature and what direction I wanted to take my research in.

Successes/Achievements

One of the highlights of the summer was the access I had to Dr. Akhlaghi, who was extremely accommodating, helpful, and kind in his feedback. Having an interlocutor in philosophy is extremely valuable, and having one who had special expertise in the field was uniquely so.

The experience also gave me valuable time to reflect on my feelings regarding pursuing philosophical research in general. Philosophical research to this depth is uncommon for an undergraduate, as most research is done solely by professors, as opposed to other subjects where research assistants are common. Therefore, the chance to work with a professor to develop my own work was an exceptional opportunity to see what philosophy academia is like, and if it was right for me.

I learned that as a philosophy researcher specifically, correspondence with others in the field is particularly valuable. I had the impression that most discussion happened in philosophy after a paper is published, either through further publications or conferences, and that much of the research process itself is isolated. However, in consistently speaking to Dr. Akhlaghi and being put in contact with another student researcher at Cambridge, I was able to improve my paper significantly.

Leadership and PDP Reflection

Through my experience this summer, the importance of perseverance and time management for a leader became especially apparent to me.

An iterative research process can become a battle of attrition in some ways, as you go over the same material and refine it further. This process can be extremely discouraging, especially when roadblocks appear. For me, the most significant roadblock was figuring out how to phrase my research in a sufficiently rigorous manner in the paper itself. While I could have a rigorous conversation with Dr. Akhlaghi, it was extremely difficult to phrase my arguments in ways that didn't open up loopholes or make unwarranted assumptions. This could lead to significant inertia as a writer, as it felt that anything written would not be correct. The importance of perseverance was particularly clear here. However, in relation to my PDP, I became a much more effective communicator as a result of this work.

Time management was also a significant challenge, partially as a result of the iterative research process. Because philosophical research can feel like it is never satisfactorily conclusive, I ended up going over the allotted six weeks significantly. While this is not bad in principle, it became harder to wrap up the project for submission because of this. This indicates that in relation to my PDP, I still have significant progress to make regarding my goals of organization/time management and overthinking as it relates to perfectionism. Increased personal reflection and self-knowledge can contribute to my improvement on this. Possible approaches are introducing guard-rails to avoid perfectionism and improve time-management, such as having external regulators (hard personal deadlines, friends/family to keep me accountable) in addition to myself. Further development here is particularly important for leadership, and I look forward to the rest of the Laidlaw Programme as an opportunity for this.