

The Shape of AI Ethics in Practice: How Communication Bounds Ethical Work in Teams

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Introduction

Despite an abundance of proposed AI ethics frameworks, a persistent gap remains between ethical principles and practical implementation.

The Solution? Researchers suggest interdisciplinary collaboration, leveraging social and technical expertise.

The Problem: Interdisciplinary teams face coordination challenges that shape how they realize their ethical commitments.

Our Goal: We identify the specific coordination challenges that bound ethical work in interdisciplinary AI development teams.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do interdisciplinary AI development teams frame “ethical” AI?

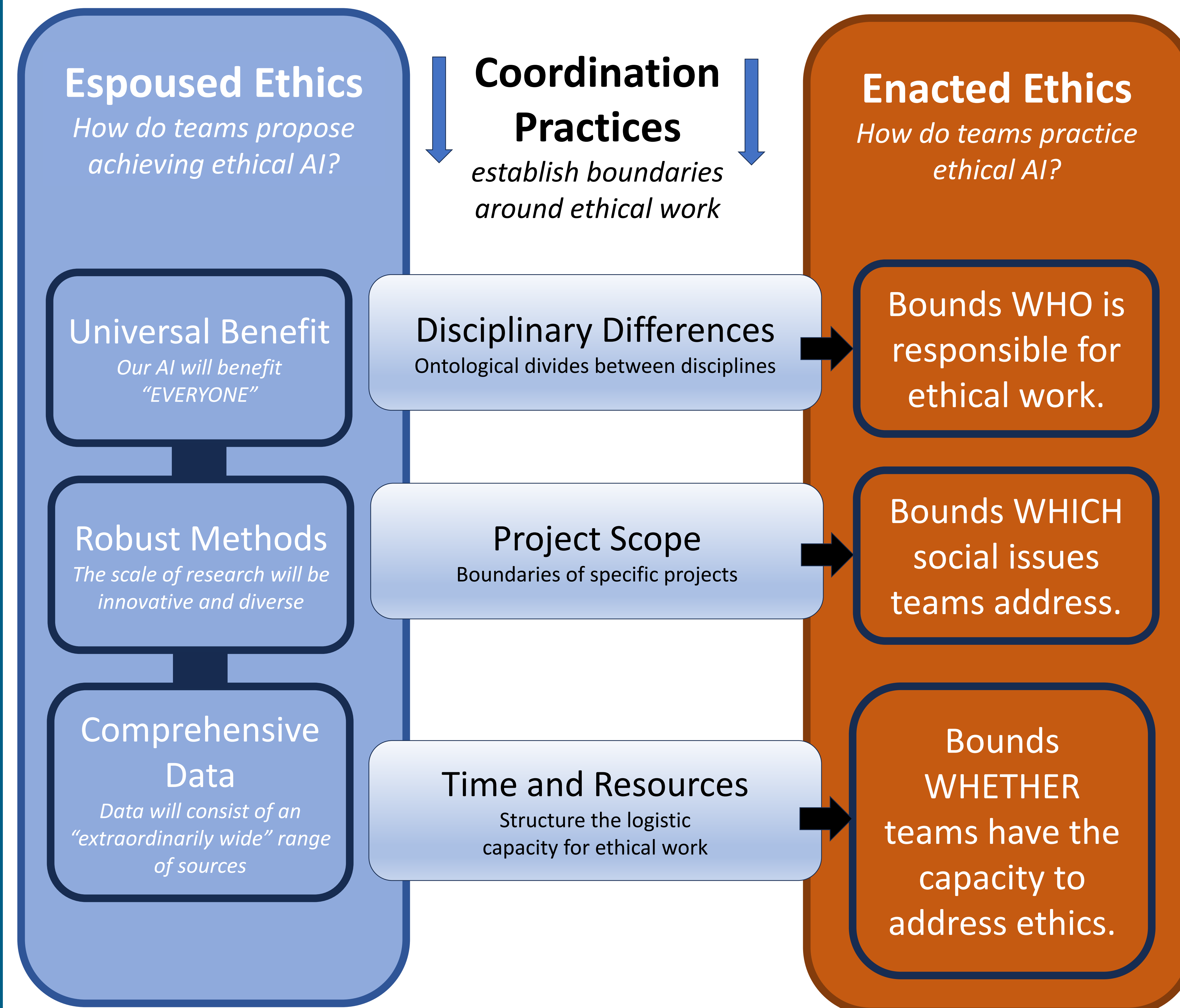
RQ2: How do interdisciplinary AI development teams coordinate to enact “ethical” AI?

Methods

Qualitative analysis of documentation across six teams:
Six proposals = 304 total pages
Six four-year reports = 145 total pages

Semi-structured interviews ($N=30$)
 $M=45.4$ minutes; 527 total pages

The Gap Between Ethical AI Principles and Practice



Data Exemplars

Disciplinary divide: “Engineers, we just try and solve problems, but the social science team takes care of people.”

Project boundaries: Across teams, human safety emerged as a salient issue – one that is proximate, measurable, and actionable. Issues such as data ownership, police overreach through surveillance, etc. emerged as more difficult to address.

Lack of incentives: “I don’t get rewarded for doing the interdisciplinary work,” but those projects “actually take even more time”

Takeaways

In AI development teams, ethics emerge in and through communication.

Interdisciplinary teams navigate significant collaborative challenges. How they manage their differences, the breadth of their projects, and their resource limitations shapes how they realize ethics in their work.

What our findings suggest:

- Build genuine mutual reliance across disciplines, avoid parallel workflows.
- Expand project scope to engage stakeholders on **systemic** concerns, not just **proximate** ones.
- Cultivate cross-disciplinary fluency.
- Institutional reward structures must change! Systems that penalize slow work undermine all of the above.



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