



## 6. What is Commodification?

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What is commodification? According to one dictionary definition it is '**the action or process of treating something as a mere commodity**'. A commodity is '**a substance or product that can be traded, bought, or sold**'. Commodification is a word generally used in a disapproving sense, especially if we talk about commodification of the human body and its parts. There is a concern that transactions involving biobanked samples may represent commodification of human tissue. This article examines whether or not this concern is well-founded.

### First Some Context

This article is one of a series of articles about 'Biobanks & Industry'. The previous article, was entitled '**The Dual Role of Academic Biobanks**', and described the vital role that academic biobanks play in supporting both (1) researchers in academia and (2) researchers in industry. The work of both sets of researchers is necessary in order to develop new drugs and diagnostics that will advance patient care. Together, academic biobanks, academic researchers and industry researchers are participating in a noble venture from which all of us stand to benefit.

As described by the diagram above, there are 'multiple factors' that inhibit the supply of biosamples from academic biobanks to industry researchers. These include practical issues (like the need for biobanks to collect the kind of samples required by industry) and cultural

issues (like the different mind-sets in academia and industry). The previous article described how the inhibitory effects of these 'multiple factors' have negative consequences:

- Industry researchers are deprived of valuable research material.
- Academic biobanks are deprived of industry funding.
- Underfunding of academic biobanks reduces their ability to serve both academia and industry.

These consequences are obviously undesirable. So we need to examine each of the 'multiple factors' carefully and in 'broad daylight' in order to decide collectively how we can avoid or minimise their effects.

### Concerns About Commodification

Amongst the 'multiple factors' just mentioned, there are a number of concerns about ethical issues. Perhaps the major ethical concern in this setting is the commodification issue. The concern that commercial transactions involving human biosamples are in some way degrading or disrespectful.

*This is the argument 'that we ought not to treat human body parts or tissues as mere objects or commodities (that we ought not to objectify or commodify them); and that buying and selling body parts or tissues would involve objectification and/or commodification'.*

This quote is taken from a 2005 article by Steven Wilkinson, entitled '[Biomedical Research and the Commercial Exploitation of Human Tissue](#)'. This article, which I would strongly recommend, is available online by simply clicking this link.

The author provides strong arguments that some of the main ethical objections to transactions involving human tissue are **unconvincing**. I will try to explain here, but suggest that you also read the original article.

To quote Wilkinson again:

*'To commodify (in the moral sense) is to treat as a (mere) commodity something which isn't really a commodity'. - page 35*

He makes the point that bodies and body parts are indeed objects. However, they are not **mere** objects. In other words, they are something with value over and above ordinary objects (ordinary objects like cans of baked beans or lumps of coal!). He argues that what is special about bodies and body parts, is that they are linked to people.

*'Bodies are more than mere objects insofar as they are somehow intimately related to persons ... So to objectify the body is to treat it as a mere object and this means treating it as if it weren't intimately related to a person'. - page 35*

Next he raises the question, what would it mean to treat a tissue sample as if it weren't intimately related to a person? (*ie. what would make someone guilty of commodifying a biosample?*). He argues that the two main ways of doing this would be (a) doing

something to the sample without the person's valid consent, and (b) doing something to it which will harm the person.

So is there a serious risk that commercial transactions involving human biosamples will give rise to harms such as this? Or are the risks only minimal? As anyone involved in biobanking knows, the following protective measures are standard practice in professional biobanks:

- informed consent, that must be transparent about commercial use, to ensure that the donor's wishes are respected.
- anonymisation or deidentification to protect the donor against possible harms.
- IRB oversight to ensure that samples are used appropriately, according to the patients wishes and accepted norms.

So we can argue that standard biobanking practice following generally accepted ethical guidelines **does not allow** human biosamples to be treated as **mere** objects or **mere** commodities. Quite the opposite in fact: professional biobankers must follow ethical guidelines that require human biosamples to be treated with great care and respect. As a result the following statement seems justified:

*Standard ethical requirements in biobanking like full informed consent, deidentification and IRB oversight, all guard against commodification of human tissue.*

For myself, I have to say the above discussion does reduce my concerns about whether there is commodification of human biosamples in the professional biobanking context. It seems that there are very good protections against this. What do you think?

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*Disclaimer: the author of this article works independently and any views expressed are his own.*

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