

Could genetic research awaken racist attitudes?

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People are different, both physically and mentally, but genetically everyone is very similar. That's been the thought of scientists for decades now. But with population research becoming more and more common, the University of Alberta's Tim Caulfield is concerned that genetic research could awaken racist attitudes.

Just last year Nobel Prize winning geneticist James Watson claimed there are genes responsible for creating differences in human intelligence. These comments made international headlines and Watson later apologized.

Caulfield knows that studying racial groups is important. For example, if a researcher is studying health disparities in the United States, they want to know why African Americans have poorer outcomes than those of European descent.

"In that case you're not saying that there's a biological difference because you're incorporating social and economic factors to that definition," said Caulfield. But it's cases where studies look to identify a gene in a population group where things can get complicated.

For those research projects, Caulfield brought together an interdisciplinary group to discuss the concerns of the scientific community and come up with ways to avoid it. This group included professionals in anthropology, bioethics, clinical medicine and law among a number of others.

"It was a very interesting group of individuals that haven't always agreed in the past," said Caulfield.

They managed to come together and agree on this topic, though, detailing a number of steps to ensure biomedical research doesn't stir up racism:

- Researchers must title the groups properly. For example, references cannot be simplified to "black people" if the researcher is speaking of those who live in Western Africa.
- Scientists must justify in the study why they're studying that certain group.
- When a discovery is made, researchers are to ensure the evidence is defined properly in the hardcopy of the study and to the media.

"We're continuing to study the issue in how race is represented," said Caulfield, whose study will be in the January edition of *Genome Medicine*.

In addition to their findings, Caulfield's group will continue to track the ways published studies reference ethnic groups. "We're trying to trace how [race-based studies] are described in various stages."

Caulfield and his group of 20 are hoping that policy makers will take a look at their ideas, but more importantly he wants his paper to stand on its own because, if scientists have reviewed the group's findings and summarized it appropriately, Caulfield knows he and his colleagues are on the right track.

"We want researchers and other people to reference it when they're doing their study."

Source: University of Alberta

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