

Scientific racism's long history mandates caution

February 14 2014

Racism as a social and scientific concept is reshaped and reborn periodically through the ages and according to a Penn State anthropologist, both medical and scientific researchers need to be careful that the growth of genomics does not bring about another resurgence of scientific racism.

"What we are facing is a time when genomic knowledge widens and gene engineering will be possible and widespread," said Nina Jablonski, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology. "We must constantly monitor how this information on human gene diversity is used and interpreted. Any belief system that seeks to separate people on the basis of genetic endowment or different physical or intellectual features is simply inadmissible in human society."

What worries Jablonski and the sociologists, psychologists and evolutionary biologists in her session at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, today (Feb. 14) in Chicago, are people who believe that they can use genetic traits to describe races and to develop race-specific interventions for each group. One particularly disturbing approach, although currently suggested as beneficial, is application of genetics to create special approaches to education. The idea that certain individuals and groups learn differently due to their genetic makeup, and so need specialized educational programs could be the first step in a slippery slope to recreating a new brand of "separate but equal."

Similar approaches in medicine that are based not on personal genetics but on racial generalizations can be just as incorrect and troubling, especially because human genetic admixture is so prevalent.

"Our species is defined by regular admixture of peoples and ideas over millennia," said Jablonski. "To come up with new reasons for segregating people is hideous."

Classification of humans began innocently enough with Carl Linnaeus and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who simply classified humans into races in the same way they classified dogs or cats—by their physical characteristics. These were scientists classifying the world around them and realizing that the classifications were not immutable but had a great deal of diversity and overlap. However, in the last quarter of the 18th century, philosophers, especially Immanuel Kant, looked to classify people by behavior and culture as well as genetics. Kant suggested that there were four groups of people, three of which because they existed under conditions not conducive to great intellect or achievement were inferior. Only the European race was capable of self-improvement and highest level of civilization.

Kant's ideas, widely accepted during his lifetime, set up the idea of European superiority in the future. Coupled with the great rise and profitability of slavery at the time, his views were adopted and morphed to legitimize the slave trade.

In the late 19th century, after Darwin's ideas became accepted, many applied his principles to the cultural, political and social spheres, developing the concept of Social Darwinism. Darwin's nephew, Francis Galton, suggested that in parts of the world there were still "pure races" and that these needed to be preserved. This line of thought led to the eugenics movement and eugenic engineering ideas of the early 20th century. Included in this were the rise of European superiority and the

trappings of eugenics and racial purity.

"The most odious of all was the rise of Nazism and biological justification of Nordic supremacy," said Jablonski. "Emphasis was placed on the need to maintain the purity of all races, but especially the Nordic race and to improve the races."

The reasoning given was that the quality of a race could be improved by preventing reproduction of those deemed physically or mentally undesirable either by sterilization or extermination.

"This included the Jewish race, which was considered to be biologically and socially destitute representing a lower form of civilization than others and preying upon higher civilizations of Europe," said Jablonski. "This was a worse consequence than justification of the [slave trade](#), being killed and subjugated by those using pseudo science as justification for scientific racism."

According to Jablonski, it is not surprising that scientific racism is experiencing a rebirth, but not because people are malicious or necessarily have a racist belief systems. She believes that the scientific neoracists often are well intentioned, but that the application of genomic-based interventions, while potentially beneficial, cannot be done on a racial basis.

"We know that it is more likely for people in certain parts of Northern Europe to develop cystic fibrosis," said Jablonski. "But it is wrong to say that this is a potential trait only of the European race, especially because of admixture.

"From a clinical medical perspective, people are more complexly admixed than ever. The best approach is to get people to talk about their levels of admixture, rather than label them or their diseases by race."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Scientific racism's long history mandates caution (2014, February 14) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-02-scientific-racism-history-mandates-caution.html>

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