

Synthetic biology still in uncharted waters of public opinion

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The Synthetic Biology Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars is releasing the results of a new set of focus groups, which find continued low awareness of synthetic biology among the general public.

The focus groups also sought opinions on the emerging field of neural engineering.

The focus group results support the findings of a quantitative national poll conducted by Hart Research Associates in January 2013, which found just 23 percent of respondents reported they had heard a lot (6 percent) or some (17 percent) about synthetic biology.

The focus group discussions also reinforce earlier findings that specific applications impact people's hopes and anxieties around synthetic biology. For example, medical applications including disease cures gained the most support in the focus groups, while the biological production of chemicals and food additives received little to no support.

Participants focused their concern on unforeseen, unintended consequences that might occur from synthetic biology. There was a clear and strong desire to study and monitor the potential risks of synthetic biology, which may require a variety of organizations.

For the first time, the focus groups also sought opinions on neural engineering – an area of science that uses engineering and brain science

to build devices to support brain control of prosthetic or robotic devices in humans. In contrast to synthetic biology, participants in these sessions found few downsides to neural engineering applications that could help people with motor disabilities or who have lost a limb.

To the extent unease surfaced about neural engineering, participants were concerned about inequitable access to the technologies. There was little concern about the adverse consequences of [neural engineering](#) beyond the individual patient, unlike applications of [synthetic biology](#), which participants feared could have much broader implications for society and the environment.

Because this is qualitative research among only a small number of individuals, the findings from these two focus groups cannot be generalized to represent the entire population of adults in the United States. Rather, these qualitative findings provide context for evaluating the 2013 survey findings and depth of understanding about how these audiences respond to these areas of science and their potential applications.

More information: [www.synbioproject.org/process/ ... /focusgroup_2014.pdf](http://www.synbioproject.org/process/.../focusgroup_2014.pdf)

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