

Does reporting on behavioral genetics misinform the public?

A study of 1,500 Americans found that media reports about behavioral genetics create unfounded beliefs about what genes can and cannot do, which defeats the purpose of scientific reporting, according to a new analysis.

American adults lead the world in science literacy so results may be even more profound in other countries, where political interests control more of scientific policy.

Study participants first read a news article about research on the influence of a gene on one of the following three traits: breast cancer, political ideology (liberal or conservative), or the tendency to go into debt. After reading the article assigned to them, they were then asked to estimate the influence of genetics on various biological (e.g., hair color, height) or behavioral (e.g., violence, alcoholism) traits on a scale from 0% genetic to 100% genetic. Genopolitics claims were all the rage a few years ago, though studies were based on suspect fMRI interpretations and surveys of college students rather than any real genetics. Biologists have dismissed the field but what does the public think after reading such journalistic claims?

After reading an article published in the British Daily Telegraph in October 2010 about a “gene responsible for liberal ideas,” readers tended to generalize the influence of genetics to other behaviors or social orientations of which there was no mention in the news article (including sexual orientation and intelligence). The same phenomenon was observed among the readers of the other article, originally published in Scientific American MIND in June 2010, which associated a gene with susceptibility to debt.

Genetic research into behavior is a minefield because it is associated with controversial speculative work, such as sociobiological attempts to explain social inequalities using the theory of evolution and the concept of natural selection and efforts to make everything in culture related to genetic function. In contrast, current trends in actual biological research are based on empirical analysis of DNA data.

Read full original article: [Liberal And Conservative Genetic Woo: How Behavioral Genetics Reporting Can Mislead The Public](#)