

The science, race, ethnicity, and identity workshop

Noa Sophie Kohler

The Jacques Loeb Centre for the History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel

e-mail: noasophi@post.bgu.ac.il

The Science, Race, Ethnicity and Identity Workshop was organized by the Jacques Loeb Centre for the History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences, on 22 October 2018 at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. The organizers were Ute Deichmann and Noa Sophie Kohler.

Recent developments in genomic and biomedical technology and practice have conjured up old fears of new, scientifically underpinned racism and eugenics and ignited new debates on questions related to biology, ethnicity, and identity. Once we categorize human variety into groups on biological grounds, do we reconceptualize race? Does the use of the term "race" invite or legitimize racism? Is there a biological basis for the notions of ethnicity and identity? It was our goal to approach these questions not only as an interdisciplinary discussion among scholars from different research areas, but also with contributions considering all hominids as well as those focusing on individual protagonists.

The chair of the Department of Life Sciences of Ben-Gurion University, Ofer Ovadia, opened the conference with words of greetings, adding that because crimes were committed in the name of science in the past, critical evaluation of scientific practice is of highest importance today.

Ute Deichmann, the Director of the Jacques Loeb Centre for the History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences introduced the topic of the workshop by sharing her thoughts on the importance of analyzing the connections between science and questions of race in the past and today. She pointed out that racism was not created by scientists and that the perception of race or biological differences does not necessarily lead to racism. The reason why science played such

a prominent role in the political discourses on race and racism starting at the beginning of the 20th century was twofold. Throughout the last century science increasingly developed newer and better methods for identifying differences between human populations and partly explaining them using evolutionary theory; and secondly, science has, for better or worse, increasingly replaced religion and philosophy as the authority not only on facts such as the origin of humans through evolution instead of creation, but also on values. Therefore, she emphasized that the idea of modern scientific rationality is and must be, based on the distinction between facts and values (Deichmann & Charpa, 2007)

The first conference speaker was Diethard Tautz from the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Biology in Plön, Germany. He first gave general background on modern research in speciation and pointed out that distinguishing between species, races, varieties or other sub-categories has always been problematic in evolutionary and taxonomic research. He argued that based on molecular analysis and the fossil record, it has been established that humans are an extremely young species. This implies that the regional differences between human populations are due to only a minor part of their gene pools, while the large majority of genetic variants are shared between all humans. This is in strong contrast to races that are produced by directed breeding, such as in dogs or horses, where phenotypes and gene pools are much more separated; hence, a definition of races among humans cannot be genetically or biologically justified (Gagneux *et al.*, 1999)

The next speaker was Giovanni Destro Bisol from the Sapienza University in Rome, Italy,

whose lecture was presented in collaboration with Maria E. Danubio, University of l'Aquila. It concerned the debate in Italy that was triggered by the appeal by several biological anthropologists to reconsider the presence of the word "race" in the Italian Constitution, a position also held by both speakers (Destro Bisol *et al.*, 2017). Regarding the Italian debate, Destro Bisol recalled that there were several positions on this topic between scientists and scholars of different disciplines, but he also recalled a general consensus on the intrinsic error of the concept of the human race. The use of "human races" as categories describing biological and/or cultural variation remains in the media and persists in popular discourse, while the racial issue is alive in the Italian political arena, even though the term race is not often used explicitly, fueled by the pervasive perception of insecurity at many levels.

Michael Gilead, from Ben Gurion University of the Negev turned our attention to the psychological underpinnings of the use of the race category. He emphasized that the latest research in social psychology finds that regardless of its biological reality, race is a pervasive category in the minds of people. He suggested that peoples' tendency to categorize the world according to race is an instantiation of more general mechanisms for identification of in-group and out-group members. Or, in other words, tribal psychology may be based on our innate predispositions, and is not merely a social construct (Gilead & Liberman, 2014).

The first speaker of the second session, which concentrated on case studies, was Etienne Lepicard from Ashkelon Academic College, Israel. He addressed the different and theoretically incommensurable approaches to the concept of race between the experimental surgeon and Nobel Laureate Alexis Carrel, author of *Man, the Unknown* (1935) a worldwide best-seller, and sociologists contributing to the *Encyclopédie Française*, like Maurice Halbwachs and the demographer Alfred Sauvy in its third volume (1936). While Carrel's writings reflect his thinking within a hierarchical racial framework and scientific racism, the sociologists consciously

tried to avoid the use of the concept of race. Nevertheless, the latter relapsed into the notion of "social eugenics" and "white races," and the former launched under Vichy Government a major research center in social sciences, the *French Foundation for the Study of Human Problems*. The continuities beyond any shift in perception are best illustrated by the appointment of Alfred Sauvy as the first director of the *National Institute of Demographic Studies*, which took over Carrel's Foundation in 1945 (Lepicard, 2019).

Nurit Kirsh, from the Open University in Raanana, Israel, focused on an Israeli expedition to Ethiopia in 1959, which was initiated by Chaim Sheba, the head of Tel-Hashomer Hospital, and carried out by two geneticists, two physicians, and a nurse. The goal was to study genetic characteristics among the Ethiopian tribes, with a special focus on a small Jewish community called Beta Israel. She claimed that the absence of genetic similarity between Beta Israel and groups belonging to the Jewish mainstream was purposely not presented to the Israeli public nor shared with political leaders and decision-makers in Israel out of political and moral concerns (Kirsh, 2007).

Israel Hershkovitz's contribution was at the same time part of the seminar series of the Life Sciences Department. He took us beyond race, and back to early modern human migration here in our region. As he explained, the southern Levant was an important crossroad for migrations of human populations between Africa, Asia and Europe, and as such has captured much attention in the efforts to follow the later phases of human evolution. The Levant had long been posited as a region of largely alternating Neanderthal and modern human occupations during the Late Pleistocene. The discovery of a *H. sapiens* cranium at the Manot Cave (ca. 55 ky), along with genetic evidence suggesting an earlier presence of Neanderthals in the Levant (>80 ky), indicates that the period of occupation of the region may have overlapped between these two hominin groups more than anticipated. Therefore Hershkovitz' current study, which is still a work in progress, describes new hominin fossils discovered in Israel

that may add important data regarding the origin of modern human populations and the time and routes of dispersal from the Levant into Eurasia (Hershkovitz *et al.*, 2015).

Our fourth and last session was dedicated to 20th century race concepts and their complexities. Linguist Christopher Hutton from the University of Hong Kong called attention to the fact that English-language sources tend to sum up National Socialist ideology as involving belief in a superior 'Aryan race' and often impute to Nazi racial anthropologists views that they did not hold. No racial anthropologist would have used the term *arische Rasse*, and the political authorities dropped the use of the term 'Aryan' in relation to racial identity from 1935 onwards, on the grounds that it was a term from linguistics (Hutton, 2005).

The difficulty of defining a Jewish race (or Jewish population isolates), be it by anthropologists from the late 19th century onwards to today's geneticists was the subject of the next speaker, Noa Sophie Kohler from Ben-Gurion University. By giving an overview of the current controversial discussion among geneticists about whether a common biological marker for Jews exists, she maintained that Jewish scientists' attempts to evaluate a shared origin for Jewish groups, today as more than one hundred years ago, should not solely be understood as a reaction to the "Othering" of Jews in Europe or as a Zionist project, but as grounded in Jewish theology. Biology has in different ways been part of Jewish theology from the beginning, and therefore a common biology is understood as part of Jewish identity – a particular type of biological reality (Kohler, 2014).

Our last speaker, Nadav Davidovitch, also from Ben Gurion University, gave examples of structural racism in the healthcare system in Israel in the 1950s, warning that structural forms of racism and their relationship to health inequities remains under-studied. While a large body of research has been invaluable in advancing knowledge on how racism influences health inequities, he claimed that it still locates the experiences of racism at the individual level. Yet the health of

social groups is likely most strongly affected by structural, rather than individual, phenomena. Therefore, he emphasized the role of history, as well as other disciplines from humanities and social sciences, in researching the phenomenon (Davidovitch & Margalit, 2008).

We believe that the workshop was a very successful attempt to highlight the manifold connections between science and race-taxonomy on the one hand, and racism and identity building on the other. It stimulated lively and fruitful discussions between the experts as well as between the contributors and students and interested lay persons.

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