Move beyond differences

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See past differences

Researchers and ethicists need to move beyond what can seem to be gendered debates when it comes to the governance of biotechnology, says **Charis Thompson**.

This coming autumn, "researchers and other experts" will discuss the scientific, ethical and policy issues associated with gene-editing research in humans. Plans for the international meeting were announced by the US National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the National Academy of Medicine (NAM) after a study was published in which researchers from China used a gene-editing tool called CRISPR to modify the genomes of non-viable human embryos.

Whether this meeting and others like it, planned in the United States, can help forge a path for gene editing that takes into account all the relevant needs and concerns will depend on what efforts are made to integrate the diverse perspectives of people with different expertise. A first step to such integration is understanding how wildly different perspectives arise.

One split in cares and concerns seems at times to fall along stereotypical gender lines. This was powerfully demonstrated during a meeting held in Atlanta last month. Approximately 200 "global thought leaders" gathered at BEINGS 2015, to "reach consensus on the direction of biotechnology for the twenty-first century". On the day I attended, it was generally men who focused on containing biosecurity threats and on how to prevent regulation from impeding research. Women raised concerns about eugenics, and inequality along class, race and gender lines in relation to biotechnology. Women were also the ones to **discuss** the environment, the future of humanity, and the possible harms to people supplying the tissues, eggs and so on, upon which advances in biotechnology rely.

I have heard people ascribe this seemingly gendered divide in bioethics to three causes: men are pro-science and women are pro-ethics; men draw on rational criteria to support their arguments whereas women draw on emotional or "woolly" ones; men are interested in tangible, pragmatic issues whereas women are interested in values and deep ethical thought.

All these reductive and sexist explanations fail to recognize that people – whatever their gender, race or class – generally focus on pragmatic and measurable solutions to the problems they find the most pressing. They just differ on which issues they think are the most important.

That the men and women at BEINGS tended to focus on different concerns illuminates how ethicists, researchers and others generally fall into one of two camps when it comes to discussions about whether and how a particular area of science should proceed.

Take questions of framing, governance and jurisdiction. When framing the problems, people in one camp tend to see cures for disease as a morally unassailable good underlying the investment and effort currently being channelled into technological advances. The people in this camp generally believe that biotechnology (and science in general) should primarily be self-policing. They also tend to perceive the public

and scholars with very different areas of expertise as outsiders who slow down research.

For those in the other camp, the worth of scientific breakthroughs should be judged within a broader social context: addressing certain problems, such as entire populations being medically underserved, should be an integral part of the responsible development of biotechnology. Those in this camp also tend to believe that the governance of biotechnology should be shaped according to how and where biotechnology is developed and deployed, for whom and at what cost -- and that a greater diversity of experts, and many more non-experts, should be involved.

Obviously, there is not a clean two-gendered split, with men neatly falling into one camp and women into the other. Multiple genders, sexualities and family structures are increasingly being recognized worldwide, biologically and politically. And numerous studies have shown that the effects of a person's gender on their choice of work, politics and so on, can be understood only if their class, race, sexuality, disability and citizenship are also considered. But deep differences in approaches to bioethics come out in a gendered way because gender still affects which fields and sub fields people enter, who does what kind of work, and where their political concerns lie.

Currently, there is a tendency for those with the narrower view to see ethicists and scientists concerned with issues such as health disparities as being "woolly". Equally, those who take a broader view of biotechnology's responsibility perceive some scientists and industry types as too caught up in the monetization and competition of their fields. These views often manifest as a perceived deficit in rationality and / or truth in the other camp.

When scientific developments throw up difficult choices, scientists, social scientists, and others need to stop positioning other people as being for or against science, or for or against ethics.

What's needed are mechanisms to ensure that neither camp dominates the other so as to have the best ethics and science from the get-go, in an iterative fashion. Following the autumn meeting, the National Academy should establish multiple working groups to study and document at regular intervals the wide range of phenomena that will be shaped by and should in turn shape gene-editing research -- from the scientific breakthroughs to health disparities and disability justice. If specialists in such working groups regularly convene, efforts to bring the diverse strands of understanding together, for instance in the same publications, stands a good chance of resulting in better science and justice.

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