

Comparative Analyses of 'Public Discourse' and 'Discourses about The Public' In Relation To Stem Cell Research: a summary report (2008)

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1. Objectives

This project was designed to examine public discourses and discourses about the public as they play out in the debate about embryonic stem cell research.

The research examined different countries and was designed to explore how such constructions played out in different cultural/political contexts.

2. Methods

2.1. Data collection

1) We started by conducting a critical review of the (English-language) research into public attitudes toward stem cell research. This was complemented by efforts to identify polls conducted in South Korea (once a South Korean researcher joined the research team)

2) We then went on to conduct a comparative analysis of four countries - the UK, New Zealand, South Korea and the USA. This analysis was pursued through reading secondary accounts about the public debate in each country, examining policy documents and records of political debates and conducting interviews with scientists and policy makers. We also participated in a range of conferences and public consultation events (e.g. three months was spent in New Zealand and one month in South Korea). This meant, for example, that the researchers were able to attend the ACART public consultation on the use of embryos for research in New Zealand in 2007 and the public event marking the end of first term of the National Bioethics Committee in South Korea in 2008.

3) Finally, a systematic analysis of newspaper coverage in each of our 4 selected countries was carried out. In order to generate comparable data from each country we focused on two key *international* breakthrough events which were reported in all four countries (the South Korean breakthroughs in February 2004, and May 2005) and the subsequent *international* scandal (when the South Korean claim unravelled, in late 2005 and into 2006). In addition, we examined key legislative events of *national* importance as appropriate. This included the reporting around the Donaldson report in 2000 in the UK, and Bush's announcement about stem cell research in 2001 and the debate about Proposition 71 in 2004 in the US. We identified all articles which included some reference to the public in any form in each of the key time periods outlined above.

2.2. Analysis

The review of research into 'public attitudes' about stem cell research identified 48 (English-language) significant and distinct studies in the public domain at the time. Each study was catalogued into a table of seven key variables plotted against each reference: date conducted, place of study (country/district), funding body, type of stem cell research, type of public, key findings, method, and how the study was located

The analysis of interviews, policy documents, and media reports, took a different form. For this part of the study, we paid attention to different ways of referring to the public (e.g. as taxpayers, lay people, voters, national citizens etc) and explored how publics were framed

more generally. This included examining how the idea of 'the public' was mobilised rhetorically, what 'public opinion' was supposed to be, when it was judged 'valid' or 'invalid' and how 'the public' were subdivided into different categories such as 'Christians', 'patients' or 'women' and explored the framing of different stakeholder voices in the 'public debate'

For the archive of press reports we also systematically indexed the use of vox pops (direct quotes from 'the man/woman in the street') and the deployment of poll data or references to findings from consultation or engagement exercises.

3. Results

3.1. Findings from the review of research into 'public attitudes'

The review of studies examining public attitudes towards stem cell research identified sharp difference in the approach (and the funding) of such research in different countries. The review as a whole covered reports across Europe and North America and included Australia. Here, however, we focus on the three Anglophone countries included in our original study and provide additional data about research we were able to pursue in South Korea (For full details see Coyle, 2007)

In the USA, research on public perceptions of stem cells has been dominated by opinion polls - generally initiated by stakeholder groups (e.g. political parties, religious organisations or patient groups) or commissioned by media companies (such as ABC News). The main thrust of questioning has been on what percentage of the voting public support embryonic stem cell research and how this correlates with factors such as religious or political affiliation.

In contrast, studies in the UK have primarily been qualitative, with data gathered through interviews and focus groups and some involving engagement events. The UK research has been primarily sponsored or conducted by funding bodies, such as the ESRC or MRC. Questions have included investigating the attitudes of potential donors, studying the role of ambivalence in relation to SCR, testing out the impact of information giving or engagement events and exploring attitudes toward issues around governance and regulation.

Research coming out of New Zealand took a qualitative/quantitative approach, utilising surveys, focus groups and interviews to triangulate results. It is notable that New Zealand has employed the 'upstream' UK model, and its Bioethics Council was, during the course of our project, running a series of public engagement events on the use of embryos in research. Research in New Zealand was funded by public bodies such as the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FoRST), The New Zealand Bioethics Council and Biotechnology Australia. The predominantly qualitative approach to New Zealander's perceptions of stem cells focused around questions such as: decision-making processes around the acceptability of stem cell research; the influence of ethnic backgrounds such as Maori, Asian, Pakeha and Pacific Islander on determining perceptions of SCR, and people's understandings of key terms associated with SCR (see Bioethics Council, 2006; Coyle et al, 2003; Hunt et al, 2004).

Our data on polls from South Korea was collected later, when a Korean speaker (Choon Key Chekar) joined the team, she identified a range of opinion polls (often internet based). Many of these polls were initiated by stakeholders or by media outlets. The focus was on

public support or opposition to embryo stem cell research in general, and support for, or opposition to Hwang in particular

3.2. Findings from the cross-country comparison – some commonalities across the four countries

a) ‘The public’ most often had a voice in the debate in all four countries through stakeholders such as scientists, patient groups and religious organisations – rather than as ‘ordinary person’. Qualitative analysis highlighted the subtly of how the public were sometimes presented as homogenous, and sometimes broken down into sub-categories and specific stakeholders (e.g. ‘patients’, women). ‘The public’ as an entity, however, is much more often talked about, or ‘on behalf of’, rather than being represented directly (however that could be achieved or symbolised). Although, of course, it should be noted that the ability to vote on the subject in the US gives the ordinary person a special kind of ‘representation’ in the issue that is quite distinct

b) The status of ‘public opinion’. Appeals to ‘The Public’ are very common in the embryonic stem cell debate and served as a key rhetorical device in all four countries – declarations about the ‘public good’ or public morality are combined with appeals to public expectations and needs. This was sometimes expressed through ideas about the service that scientists and politicians could offer their ‘citizens’ or linked to a ‘future public’ as in the needs of ‘future generations’ or that we all have a duty to a *global* public as in appeal to ‘humanity’.

The public also feature prominently in debates about stem cell research through claims about ‘public opinion’. Such claims were most commonly asserted by both journalists and by stakeholders (NGOs, religious figures, scientists and policy-makers) with no evidence base at all. However, even, or perhaps *especially*, in face of survey research or consultation exercises, ‘public, or even public demonstrations (as in South Korea) opinion’ is a highly flexible concept. If ‘public opinion’ appeared to supported a speaker's perspective then the results could be cited as justification; if it did not, then it could be omitted, dismissed as invalid (because of faulty data collection or conflicting evidence) or used to justify the call for more ‘public debate’ or ‘public education’ (e.g. the idea that the public are misled by science fiction fantasies – see Kitinger, in press). Thus it was clear that stakeholders often sidestep public opinion if it is out of step with their preferred stance or suggest that current ‘public opinion’ is not a good basis on which to make policy. This tendency was evident both from stakeholders seeking to promote embryo stem cell research and those seeking to oppose it.

c) Making public opinion quantifiable or visible. It is also clear that consulting the public (via consultation or surveys) has also sometimes become part of the battle, with different ‘polls’ being commissioned by media outlets or funded by different sides (a practice most prominent in the US and in South Korea, but recently also appearing in the UK). In South Korea it was also evident that the same ‘public opinion’ (in support of Hwang) could be framed in one instance as scientifically well informed and intelligent, but later, after exposure of fraud, be framed as emotional and irrational. The representation of so-called ‘public opinion’ can also susceptible to PR exercises. The flower performance, where South Korean women lined up for the cameras to lay flowers and offer to donate their eggs to Hwang, was widely used by the media (national and international) as a simple demonstration of (female) public support. It was rarely mentioned that this public

demonstration had actually been organised by an event agent commissioned by Hwang (see *Pressian*, 31 December 2005 and Han Hak Soo, 2006: 447).

3.3. Findings from the cross-country comparison – some differences

Our interview data, fieldwork, analysis of policy debates, and analysis of press reporting also highlighted key differences between the four countries we studied. The main contrasts are as follows

a) Different ways of framing the public

- The US debate repeatedly frames people as ‘*voters*’ – a term which were rarely used in the other countries. This reflects the distinct way in which stem cell research has become a political issue in the US (related to a Democrat/Republican splits and becoming a feature of both President Bush’s and now President Obama’s campaigns – both men making key interventions in the debate in the early days of their presidency). The emphasis on the public as ‘a ‘voting’ public also reflects specifically the campaign and events surrounding Proposition 71 in California.
- The debate in the US about stem cell research also repeatedly frames the public as ‘*taxpayers*’, a term rarely used in the debate in the other countries in our study. This reflects the concentration of the debate there on legislation around the use of public funds (in California and at a Federal level).
- By contrast, in the UK, the public are more likely to be framed as some version of the lay public or ordinary citizen (with its emphasis on expert/non-expert divisions, rather than the public as having a voice through their status as voters and tax payers)

b) Different mechanisms for assessing and representing public opinion

- **Vox pops** from ‘ordinary’ members of the public rarely appeared in UK, US or NZ reports, but became a feature in the South Korea media. This seems to be connected to the fact that national identity became very explicitly tied with the stem cell enterprise in South Korea. It is also connected to the high-internet usage, and the special place this holds in the ‘public sphere’ in South Korea – where it serves as a key site for reporters seeking to access ‘public opinion’.
- Different countries also give different emphasis to quantitative survey data to assess public attitudes to stem cell research. Confirming findings from our review of research into public attitudes we found that much of the debate about stem cell research in South Korea and the US focuses on findings from **opinion polls**. By contrast, New Zealand, following in the UK tradition, places greater emphasis on a ‘public consultation/engagement’ model of policy making in this area – and this was evident not only in the media reporting, but also in our fieldwork and conversations with policy makers and scientists.
- The media in each country reflected (and contributed to) the different emphasis on qualitative and quantitative approaches to assessing/representing public responses. The UK and New Zealand reporting had very few headlines about polls – and we could not find examples of a media outlet actually funding a survey. By contrast the US and South Korean press included many headlines about survey results (sometimes funded by the very outlet which publicised it).

Examples of headlines in the South Korean Press

“77% of the public ‘against human embryonic research’, the first citizen opinion poll by Hallym Univ. shows” [*Hankyoreh*, 21 March 2002]

“10 out of 6 Christian netizens in favour of Prof. Hwang Woo-suk’s stem cell research” [*Kookmin Ilbo* 27 May 2005]

Examples of headlines in the US press

Bush vows veto of bills shifting stem-cell policy; Polls show American support [*The Washington Times*, August 14, 2001]

The battle lines on stem cells; Although polls show support for research, experts say public opinion is uninformed on the basics. [*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 13, 2004]

Poll backs research on stem cells but cloning opposed in Mass. Survey [*The Boston Globe*, March 13, 2005]

c) The public and religious and national characteristics

- The public within each country are sometimes framed through idea of **national characteristics**. For example, in New Zealand and American media included references to a pioneer legacy, meaning that ‘New World’ citizens would be eager to explore new scientific and technological territory. However ideas about ‘the public’s national characteristics were particularly prevalent in discussion of the South Korean public. This was true both in the national South Korean press and in the international media coverage about South Korea. The South Korean public, for example, were framed as predisposed to hard work and innovation (while Hwang’s breakthroughs were being celebrated) and the reframed after the scandal as celebrity-worshipping nationalists, desperate for a hero like Hwang to represent their country.
- (Christian) **religion** was frequently highlighted as a key division between different publics. The framing of the ‘religious public’ differed by country. The ‘religious’ public tended to be marginalised in reporting in the UK, but were given more status in the US reporting. New Zealand was distinguished by the status accorded the ‘spiritual values’ of the indigenous Maori people. The debate in South Korea was different again because the ‘religious public’ were not simply framed as opponents of stem cell research, not least because of the Buddhist tradition in south Korea (and some explicitly support for embryo stem cell research in general, and Hwang in particular from some Buddhists).

Conclusion

Discourses about ‘The Public’ are ‘constructed’ rather than simply ‘found’ or ‘reflected’. The construction of the public both reflects, and helps to constitute different ideas about citizenship and science in diverse national contexts. Consideration of how publics are framed is crucial to a full understanding of the rhetoric and practices surrounding the scientific enterprise.
