



the social science stem cell initiative

Comparative Analyses of 'Public Discourse' and 'Discourses about the Public' in Relation to Stem Cell Research.

Over the last few years there has been a rapid expansion of research seeking to document people's views about stem cell research. With the recent shift of emphasis onto 'upstream' engagement, a diverse range of publics have also been invited to become stakeholders in the policy-making and innovation process. However, there are gaps between the range, complexity and ambivalence of responses that characterise everyday talk (public discourses), and how these are represented/used by the mass media, different lobbying groups and policy makers (discourses about the public).

The aim of this project is to gain a critical and reflexive understanding both of 'public discourses' and 'discourses about the public'. The research involves

1. Critically reviewing existing research about public responses to stem cell innovation.
2. Examining how 'the public' are represented in the mass media in different countries (and how these compare to the research findings examined above).
3. Exploring how ideas about the public inform policy making processes, drawing upon the UK, USA, New Zealand and South Korea as specific case studies.

The key findings of stage 1 are outlined below, preceded by a brief description of methodology:

Stage 1: Cross-comparative analysis of public engagement with stem cells

A critical analysis of the literature constituted the first stage of our research. A systematic review was carried out of English-language work on public responses to stem cell research. This included surveys, focus group studies, interviews, consultation exercises and engagement initiatives (such as citizen juries and online forums). These studies were catalogued and compared across variables such as: when they were conducted, where they were carried out, how they were funded, the type of questions they explored, and the type of findings that were generated

Common findings across all the studies were that most showed a general support for all forms of stem cell research, with a preference for adult/cord blood, over foetal and lastly,

embryonic. Internationally, a significant majority of people knew very little about stem cell research other than embryonic (unless people had participated in engagement activities). Attitudes were often tinged with an ambivalence that was noted, but in many studies, not thoroughly explored in the subsequent analysis.

Although religion was frequently mobilized in the USA as an important category in determining public opinions, qualitative studies in New Zealand, Australia and the UK suggest this plays a less significant role. Rather references to religion in these countries often emerged in relationship to wider concerns with safety, the instigation of ethical boundaries and concern over the use of woman's bodies as embryo-making machines.

Our analysis of methods and the 'framing' of research suggest that there are significant differences in how 'publics' are approached in different countries. US opinion polls tended to collapse 'publics' into citizen-voters whose statistical profile slotted into one of two main categories: 'party affiliates' or 'religious persons' or some combination of both. Moreover, survey data constructed a disembodied public, whose subjectivity was reduced to bar charts and statistical tables, and presence was determined by the conjunction of opinion polls with political referendums. By contrast, recent UK-based research divided the monolithic 'public' into a series of sub-categories, in an attempt to see individuals as a collection of stakeholders or scientific citizens. Here, publics are viewed as one stakeholder among many in the stem cells debate at local, national and global scale levels. Although an apparently democratic approach, this also tends to disguise the inevitable and unequal power relations that are already in force before these stakeholders meet and debate.

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