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Joanna K. Malinowska

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Methodological and Ethical Risks Associated with the Epistemic Unification of Tribe Members

Joanna K. Malinowska

Adam Mickiewicz University

Saunkeah et al. (2021) analyze the aptness of extending the Belmont Principles of Respect for Persons, Beneficence and Justice to AI/AN tribal communities as a whole. They argue that to protect AI/AN communities from undue research harms, when organizing and conducting studies researchers should apply approaches such as community based participatory research (CBPR) within the context of the Belmont's Report's research ethics principles, extended by additional principles of sovereignty and solidarity. However, while

interpreting tribes as "unities of identity" might actually help to support their self-determination and protect them from exploitation and unethical research practices, it also gives cause for concern. The authors discuss ethical issues arising, e.g. from the tensions between individual and group autonomy, interests and responsibilities (Saunkeah et al. 2021). Instead, in my commentary, I concentrate on the risk that shifting the focus from individuals to a group subject (even in ethical discussions on their participation in research) may

strengthen the epistemic tendency to treat tribes as a homogeneous group.

Among the harms done to the AI/AN individuals and communities due to their participation in biomedical research, Saunkeah et al. (2021) mention misrepresentations, stereotyping, and inappropriate generalizations (5). In principle, the use of CBPR is supposed to protect tribes and their representatives from such practices. Paradoxically, it may, however, deepen these problems. This is, among other things, due to at least two psychological mechanisms contributing to the stereotyping and racialization of others, the operation of which may be buttressed when the basic form of the identification of minority members is the group level. One of them is the unfamiliarity homogeneity effect (UHE, c.f. also out-group homogeneity effect and other-race effect) in regard to the representatives of other groups (Malinowska 2016), which leads to perceiving them as almost the same (having similar psychological and physiological characteristics). The second is psychological essentialism, resulting in the belief that all the members of a particular social category share inherent properties that determine their identity (Haslam and Whelan 2008). Together, they can lead to the epistemic unification¹ of representatives of other social groups—their (more or less) unintentional and automatic stereotypical, homogenous and essentialist perception. As a result, they can also prompt the socio-cultural racialization and dehumanization of such groups and their members (Malinowska 2016).

What is crucial here is that both the abovementioned mechanisms responsible for epistemic unification can be significantly strengthened simply by categorizing people primarily as members of specific larger communities (e.g. a sports team, a subculture, a professional or racialized group such as a tribe), rather than as individuals. In such situations, they are more likely to be perceived as similar in appearance and behavior to other representatives of their community (Malinowska 2016, 2021; Malinowska and Żuradzki 2017). The mechanism also works the other way—when a given person gains individuality (e.g. others get to know their name, history, characteristic), they cease to be just a “symbol” of a larger group, almost merging into one with others, and become an entity with a set of unique features (Malinowska 2016, 2021).

¹In the philosophical literature, the term “epistemic unification” usually refers to the attempts at bringing together different methods of investigating and reasoning about the world (Jones 2013).

Even more importantly, epistemic unification can be additionally reinforced by formulating statements in a generic language (Hollander 2009; Goldfarb et al. 2017). Using generic language to describe the features of a group as a whole affects how people categorize others, essentialize their characteristics, and behave toward them. For example, when generic (“members of a group X are prone to obesity”) rather than specific (“Jon is prone to obesity”), language is used to define the features of a particular community (or other social or nonsocial categories), people tend to automatically assume that these features are inherent, stable and universal for all group members (Goldfarb et al. 2017). Finally, according to some scientists, formulating statements in generic language about a novel social group encourages both children and adults “to categorize individuals using a lower evidentiary standard regardless of negative consequences for presumed social-group membership” (Goldfarb et al. 2017, 1), in contrast to when similar statements are formulated in specific language.

Interpreting tribes as units of identity (even just by formulating statements about tribal communities as a whole in generic language) may contribute to the overlap of both of these mechanisms and strengthen the human tendency to epistemically unify representatives of other groups. There is a fear that at every stage of planning and carrying out biomedical research, the attention of scientists can shift from individuals to tribes as unified groups. Although mechanisms such as UHE and psychological essentialism primarily affect people’s everyday cognitive processes and behaviors, they can translate into how researchers conduct their studies, analyze data and draw conclusions. It can be supposed that conceptual and linguistic references to communities, rather than to individuals, strengthens the already existing tendencies in biomedical research to racialize populations. In that case, it may further deepen racial stereotypes in the field of medicine and, as a result, also strengthen social inequalities.

Moreover, if the results of the research work are additionally formulated in a general language (which is most often used in science), it may reinforce existing folk racial beliefs (e.g. due to the dissemination of research results in the media) and create the erroneous impression that the tribes subject to research conclusions constitute homogeneous groups with specific biological characteristics. Thus, such epistemic unification of tribes due to CBPR can influence social relations and the situation of representatives of AI/AN communities, not only from the level of scientific

investigations, but can also—through their popularization—affect medical practice (e.g. in the process of diagnosis and choosing a treatment method) as well as the course of social discourse.

The epistemic unification of the representatives of native communities may in most cases be methodologically misleading. When it comes to designing and conducting biomedical research, it is vital to always take into account that the biologically significant experiences and characteristics of tribe members vary from person to person. For example, about 78% of the representatives of tribal communities live off reservations and, for this reason, have contact with entirely different substances than their inhabitants, who are often exposed to cancer-causing environmental risk factors (Brook 1998; Weaver 2010). While the fact that the representatives of some populations live on reservations (i.e. contamination prone areas) may be crucial for studying the effects of toxins on human health, it is their place of residence that is significant in this context, not their political status or self-identification as a member of AI/AN community itself (which, however, might be relevant when the impact of institutional racism on health is analyzed) (Meissner 2021). It is also worth adding that many people who self-identify as members of indigenous communities do not have documented political status of being AI/AN, e.g. because they do not meet the given tribe's criteria for tribal enrollment, or they belong to a tribe which is not federally recognized (Meissner 2021).

Corresponding ethical and methodological issues resulting from the bias of epistemic unification basically apply to all studies using racial categories and other social classifications as reference classes. In order to prevent such problems, it is necessary to carefully consider which people's characteristics are biologically relevant to the analyzed problem. When it comes to biomedical research with AI/AN communities, to perform this task reliably, researchers must be able to “return” from the level of tribes as units of identity to the level of individuals who, despite shared tribal affiliation, have different histories and features and therefore might be assigned to many different reference classes. Thus, it is crucial to find an answer to the question of how to make it easier for people (both researchers and laypeople) to move between these levels, on the one hand to support the development of ethically oriented and reliable science (constantly operating with generalizations and generic language), and on the other hand to prevent harmful stereotyping in scientific and social practice.

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ORCID

Joanna K. Malinowska  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8330-5234>

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