

Why Scholars Won't Research Group Differences

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Scientists and other researchers should cease looking into differences between the sexes and cease looking into differences among ethnic groups and races. This is the first conclusion philosopher of science Philip Kitcher drew in 1997, in “An Argument about Free Inquiry.”¹

In that paper, and then in a 2011 book, *Science in a Democratic Society*,² Kitcher stated two further conclusions: that professors and universities (and other public institutions) should actively discourage research into sex differences, ethnic differences, and racial differences; and that governments should ban research into sex, ethnic, and racial differences.

Kitcher endorsed the first conclusion, but not the second or the third. Kitcher said that though his reasoning to the second and third conclusions was strong, still, because certain objections to those conclusions are also strong, he couldn't be sure that his reasoning in favor of them was cogent. It's a matter of weighing reasons for and reasons against, he said, and he couldn't yet say which way the balance tipped.

The first conclusion, the conclusion Kitcher endorsed, that researchers should avoid questions of differences between males and females, homosexuals and heterosexuals, blacks and Asians, the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim, the Inuit and the Igbo, rests on widely accepted ideas about the tendency of people to reason poorly about controversial matters and to resist changing their minds. All

¹Philip Kitcher, “An Argument about Free Inquiry,” *Noûs* 31 (1997): 279-306.

²Philip Kitcher, *Science in a Democratic Society* (Prometheus Books, 2011).

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of us, the psychologists tell us, are prone to favor confirming evidence over disconfirming evidence, to favor theories that flatter ourselves or that suggest we deserve our good fortune (or don't deserve our bad fortune), and to generalize dogmatically from small samples, especially from samples we ourselves have collected.

Scientific research into a purported difference, Kitcher noted, might reveal that that difference does exist or that it doesn't. It might show that the difference is rooted in biology or that it isn't. Now suppose that lots of people believe that some purported difference is real or biological and that that belief inclines many of them to treat certain people poorly. One might think that scientific research that reveals the purported difference to be unreal or to be cultural (the result, perhaps, of people having been poorly treated) would be a wonderful thing. After all, since that research exposes as false a belief that sustains demeaning or harmful behavior, people will drop that belief and, thereby, change their ways.

Our cognitive biases, though, complicate things. Let's suppose researchers have shown the belief in question to be false. And yet, because of their cognitive biases, people who hold that belief will not believe it has been shown to be false. It's *their* belief, after all, that's at stake, and, worse, their way of life. They will respond that science is fallible and researchers are often biased. They will say further studies need to be conducted. They will complain that evidence that favors their view has been suppressed.

In the end, then, says Kitcher, research will either tend to confirm the belief about difference, in which case the research will perpetuate discriminatory and bigoted behaviors, or it will tend to disconfirm the belief, in which case the research will be attacked, denied, or explained away. Either way, people subject to ill treatment as the result of false beliefs about sex, ethnic, or racial differences will be none the better off. The conclusion to draw is that, overall, research into difference is more likely to bring harm than benefit.

If research into difference is unlikely to help anyone and could harm people, then researchers have good reason to stay clear of it.

Kitcher addresses the important objection that a researcher might value intrinsically his investigations into differences. The significance of the fact that a researcher is devoted to a study for its own sake cannot be measured on a common scale against the expected utility of the study. If the researcher values his research highly enough, he would have reason to continue with it despite its low or negative expected utility. Kitcher's response to this objection is that if a researcher values one field of study for its own sake, he is able to value many other fields of study for their own sakes. A researcher can give up the study of

difference, engage in another study, and should he come to value that other study for its own sake, he will have lost nothing. (At least, says Kitcher, newcomers who have not yet settled on a passion have reason to pursue fields other than human difference.)

Kitcher's argument against researching difference depends on the idea that a person's belief about people of a particular type inclines that person to suppose each individual of that type is that way. It depends, that is, on the idea that people regularly take individuals to represent their group. But of course, you might, as I do, try to treat people as individuals, and not as representatives of one or another of the groups to which they belong. Even if some trait of mind or quality of character is strongly correlated with a visible marker such as a race or a sex, you will, nonetheless, respond only to the traits and qualities you perceive actually to be had by the person with whom you are interacting. Or, perhaps, you assume that each person you meet is honest, kind, diligent, self-aware, and so on, correcting yourself in individual cases only as you encounter disconfirming evidence. For you, then, contentions about differences group to group will not matter to the practice of living. If contentions about group differences don't lead to wrongfully discriminatory treatment, researchers have no reason to avoid looking into group differences.

Well, that you don't uncritically perceive the world through a web of preconceptions doesn't imply that no one does. Nonetheless, you are hardly alone. One criticism of Kitcher's argument, then, is that it overestimates the extent or depth to which beliefs about the traits of groups affect the ways in which people treat others. For most people, we might think, commitments to fairness and to the good of individuals as individuals play a much greater role in their interpersonal and social behavior than do their beliefs about, say, race-based differences. For that reason, whatever the scientists determine about various human groups will make little practical difference to the way most people treat other people.

Let us turn our attention to the second conclusion, that we and our institutions should make it difficult for researchers to investigate difference. If research into sex, ethnic, or racial differences will not help in the fight against oppression but might well make things worse, then, according to Kitcher's second conclusion, professors and universities should seek to dissuade researchers from looking into these differences. Oppression by sex, ethnicity, or race is a serious matter, and so it's not enough that conscientious researchers voluntarily stand away from the field of difference. Indeed, conscientious researchers should not stand away from the field of difference unless everyone else does, for if they remove

themselves, the field will be left to researchers who aren't committed to the good struggle. Should the conscientious absent themselves, that is, research confirming the existence of invidious differences will dominate the field, as has happened with Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* (2018) and Ibram X. Kendi's *STAMPED: Racism, Antiracism, and You* (2020).

As I said above, while Kitcher thinks the argument for the second conclusion is strong, he doesn't endorse that conclusion itself. Actively dissuading researchers from pursuing studies in a field means shutting them out of competitions for research funding and other resources. That will create resentment and retaliation. It means manipulating library and other budgets. It means intervention by department heads, deans, and vice presidents into curriculum and into hiring and promotion. It means oversight of publications and teaching. All this threatens to undermine the ethos of academic freedom and collegiality at the university. Should dissuasion involve individual professors or gangs of professors going after benighted colleagues, "undermine" would give ground to overwhelm. Things would get ugly quickly and all research and teaching would be affected or threatened.

For Kitcher, the harm to the university that almost certainly would attend efforts to dissuade researchers from inquiring into sex, ethnicity, or race is worrisome enough to have even active egalitarians and meliorists stand down, despite the great likelihood that significant harm will result from researchers deaf to the first argument continuing to inquire into sex, ethnic, and racial difference.

And yet, here we are today, deep in the world of the second conclusion. Professors and students are actively making it difficult for researchers to go freely and fearlessly into threatening topics. Administrators, editorial boards, and other academic agents are keeping the gates. Careers are being sabotaged and examples are being set. It's not only research into sex, ethnic, or racial differences that has been targeted, but research in any field at all that might not confirm the right conclusions, the academic mission be damned.

Let me mention just a few recent cases from here in Canada.

There's Stephen Perrott, a psychology professor at Mount Saint Vincent University, in Halifax. Dr. Perrott, despite his record as a researcher and his other professional accomplishments, has been unable to obtain funding from the Mount for a study of student conceptions of rape culture. As well, his research on policing has been languishing on an editor's desk, accepted for publication at one moment, returned for revisions the next. I know about this, though, only because I know Stephen. It would be good to have the facts on just how many

others are also being shut out. How many projects are stalled because of the extra-academic commitments or fears of academic officers?

Richardo Duchesne, at the University of New Brunswick, chose to retire rather than to continue to face the mob, a mob that included the then-president of the Canadian Historical Society as well as Dr. Duchesne's colleagues and the academic administrators at his university. Susan Crawford, a long-time recipient of informal support from the University of Victoria, lost that support because her views on polar bear populations didn't accord with UVic preferences. Mark Hecht, like Dr. Crawford not a tenured professor, had a course he was to teach cancelled because his research on ethnic diversity and social trust touched a nerve. Mr. Hecht's association with Mount Royal University is now in the past.

Kathleen Lowrey was serving as associate chair in anthropology at the University of Alberta, in charge of advising anthropology students, when one or more students complained that they didn't like her views on women and transgenderism. Though no one had questioned either her competence as an advisor or her dedication to the students she oversaw, Dr Lowrey's dean relieved her of her position.

Tomáš Hudlický had a peer-reviewed opinion piece published in a chemistry journal. In the article, Dr. Hudlický expressed reservations about preferential hiring, university attitudes toward students, and the integrity of chemistry publications from China. Several members of the journal's board publicly resigned over the journal's publishing the article; the editors retracted the article, apologized, and fired the subeditors who had approved it for publication. Dr. Hudlický's university issued two statements condemning the thoughts on preferential hiring and mentoring students found in the article. A journal cancelled an issue that was to be devoted to Dr. Hudlický's work as a chemist.

In each of these cases, an individual academic suffered harm. That's serious enough. But we must also note that each case sends a signal, a very clear signal, to all other academics. Each case tells all academics that we had best avoid conducting research in particular areas or expressing certain views.

The world of the second conclusion could not have come into being had university people, or at least the leaders among them, been devoted either to research for its own sake or to the culture and politics of liberal individualism. It came into being because many of our colleagues and our institutions are more strongly committed to certain non-academic ends than they are to the academic mission or the academic ethos of the university. For them, that mission and that ethos are dispensable.