

How DNA Led to the Deconstruction of Race

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“There’s No Scientific Basis for Race—It’s a Made-Up Label” by Elizabeth Kolbert, an article that appeared in National Geographic Magazine in 2018, details the recent research about the relation between race and genetics (2018). The article also documents the conflicts between Samuel Morton’s research in the 19th century, to current genetic studies where scientists are analyzing genetic similarities between races (Kolbert, 2018). Kolbert includes different examples of current genetic research to drive the point that race is not a genetic topic, including the discovery that all existing humans evolved from Africa (2018). David Reich of Harvard University was quoted saying the genetics show that “mixture and displacement have happened again and again and that our pictures of past ‘racial structures’ are almost always wrong” (Kolbert, 2018, pp. 4). Kolbert’s article details important scientific research that deconstructs our knowledge of ‘race’, and how it truly is a fake concept.

This article begins with the introduction of Samuel Morton’s 19th century research into his classification of different ‘races’ based on skull volume (Kolbert, 2018). Morton’s research has since been proven invalid because of his shaky experimental techniques, and the introduction of genetic testing (Kolbert, 2018, pp. 1). It is up to interpretation whether Morton’s research should be included in Kolbert’s article about genetic research (2018). The point Kolbert tries to convey through Morton’s research is that he founded ‘scientific racism’, and that Morton’s efforts have since been proven morally and scientifically incorrect (2018, pp. 1). Taking all of this into consideration, it can be argued that the inclusion of Morton’s studies the article decreases in validity.

The article also includes a study into tracking the DNA trail of our ancestors, who originated as different groups spread through the continent of Africa (Kolbert, 2018, pp. 2). Studies into gene relations have shown that all of humankind began and evolved in Africa, but it

is unclear when in history this event took place (Kolbert, 2018, pp. 2). Diversity began when groups of Homo Sapiens, who had migrated and previously had no contact with one another, began to encounter each other and breed to eventually form the mixed society that we know today (Kolbert, 2018, pp. 2). DNA shows that through the ages, genetic material mutated to adapt the traveling humans to their new surroundings. These genetic mutations came in a wide variety of physical traits, hand-picked by natural selection. For example, the human mutations showed as different skin pigments, hair thicknesses, and organ mutations that helped migrated populations adapt to their new surroundings (Kolbert, 2018, pp. 3).

The article also includes a study conducted by the DNA Discussion Project at West Chester University (Kolbert, 2018, pp. 4). The group collected saliva samples from students to test their DNA and genetically trace their family origin (Kolbert, 2018, pp. 5). The inclusion of this study was not relevant to the topic, only to include the point that our genetic make-up may not match our physical characteristics. Kolbert's article details the journey of DNA tracking, but also includes some points that aren't as appealing to the reader and make the article less interesting. Without the inclusion of the DNA Discussion Project and a full page of Morton's biased research, the article may have appealed to many more readers on the topic of genetic material. By including where and why race was invented, and how the world could use this genetic research in a beneficial way, the point of the article could have become more effective. The conclusion of the article also lacked a bigger picture. For example, Kolbert could have talked about the effect of eradicating the topic of 'race' all together instead of suggesting we should create new racial categories that "function better" (2018, pp. 5). By suggesting we single out more people into different categories, Kolbert lost the empowerment in her concluding paragraph (2018).

Elizabeth Kolbert wrote “There’s No Scientific Basis for Race—It’s a Made-Up Label” to inform the readers of the National Geographic about the science behind race and how genetically there are no racial categories. Kolbert’s article details important research that reconstructs our knowledge of ‘race’, and how society believes in this social construct. The article gives the reader a good understanding of how “The concept of race has no genetic or scientific basis” (Kolbert, 2018, pp. 2), however, the article could have used different studies to solidify the point. In the future, including studies that support the main topic of the article would make an easy read for readers with an eye for science.

References

Kolbert, E. (2018, October 22). There's No Scientific Basis for Race—It's a Made-Up Label.

National Geographic. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/race-genetics-science-africa>