

# Beyond the Universal Subject of Cognition

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With a point of departure in the general call for more information I will problematise some basic assumptions of Public Understanding of Science efforts in the context of the Biotechnology controversy.

## A Need for Information

In the late nineties we can find a broad consensus calling for more Information on Biotechnology. In Austria this was an outcome of a public debate around the national referendum on genetic engineering in April 1997. Most often the situation was understood as follows:

- **Problem:** There is little public acceptance of genetic engineering
- **Hypothesis:** The Public disapproves of genetic engineering because of a lack of knowledge. This hypothesis builds on an **underlying assumption** which can be called knowledge-acceptance relation
- **Solution:** This can be cured by providing broadly high standard information

## Criticism

In the following I will question the rationale as outlined before. Objections have been made by criticising what is called:

- the **deficit model**, that proposes an expert-lay dichotomy
- the **package model**, that suggests that knowledge could be transferred like a good
- the concept of a **universal subject** of cognition, that presupposes an a priori given rational subject

## Cogito-Subject

René Descartes has successfully introduced the idea of a universal subject that is a priori given and thus unchangeable. Such a subject is per definition capable of cognition. My claim

is that Descartes' epistemological cogito-subject is an underlying assumption for most "Public Understanding of Genetic Engineering" efforts. According to such an understanding everybody can access knowledge and truth for he or she is a universal subject. Thus knowledge dissemination and communication processes take place on the grounds of a universal cogito-subject. The individual has nothing to do, but to receive the truth from those who know and show insight to the message.

### **Rationale**

According to a universal cogito-subject all scientists will understand genetic engineering the same way and can communicate this to everybody who is a rational human being. Everybody will understand the world in the same way. And because everybody is a universal cogito-subject everybody will arrive at the same conclusions after knowing everything about genetic engineering.

### **Subject of Experience**

Introducing the category of „experience“ to the discussion a different picture emerges. As soon as the subject of cognition is not a given, but an „aposteriori“ it cannot be universal. Communication processes need to be seen before the backdrop of a „subject of experience“, that is different in time and space (changeable), that is different from one another (multiform).

### **Conclusion**

With a point of departure in a „Subject of experience“ public understanding on genetic engineering efforts will not expect that more knowledge will automatically lead to more acceptance thereof. Because it is evident that people with different experiences can arrive at different conclusions even if they share the same data or in other words if everybody knows everything about genetic engineering.

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