Genetic Testing, Nature, and Trust

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Genetic Testing, Nature, and Trust

Anita LaFrance Allen

I.

The United States Human Genome Project is a billion-dollar commitment to “analyzing the structure of human DNA and determining the location of the estimated 100,000 human genes.”¹ The genome project aims to decode the complex sequence of hereditary instructions contained within DNA to determine which genes are responsible for what physiological functions throughout the human lifespan. Part of an international genome initiative, the United States’ initiative is expected to cost an estimated $200 million per year for fifteen years.² Officials at the National Institutes of Health predict that scientists will complete the sequencing of the human genome early in the first decade of the twenty-first century.³

The timely progress of the genome project has intensified the need for careful discussion of its applications. Genetic science has already produced reliable techniques of prenatal diagnosis, paternity testing, and forensic identification. A paramount aspiration for gene science is that its medical applications will dramatically improve the ability to prevent, predict, treat, and cure serious disease and disorders.

Science inspires hope, but also fear.⁴ Developments in gene science have prompted predictions that human beings increasingly will “play God,” interfering with nature by genetically reengineering the natural world. Although few people object to the goal of reducing the risk of early onset debilitating diseases, many object to genetic manipulation seemingly aimed at cleansing the human race of medically and socially imperfect people. Gene science has led to fears that the future, like the

² See id. at 7.
³ See id. at 1.
past, will be marked by eugenics and intolerance.

Another major fear prompted by human genetics is fear of lost privacy. Genetics science indeed augurs diminished privacy. In the wake of privacy losses, comes the potential for social stigma, discrimination in employment, barriers to health insurance, and other problems. For people and communities of color, privacy loss is particularly worrisome, because stigma, discrimination, and barriers to health insurance are ubiquitous anyway. My greatest philosophical concern is that novel applications of gene science, including genetic testing, could become pervasive before appropriate ethical and legal safeguards are in place to protect valued forms of privacy. Moreover, the splendid benefits of science could blind society to some of its social costs, lowering expectations of privacy below levels philosophers describe as just and ethical.

The fate of privacy in our age of science is mainly, but not solely, a

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5 See id.
worry of ethicists, health-care providers, and lawyers. Public awareness of genetic policy problems is limited. But opinion polls suggest that the general public views threats to privacy as significant issues. Because of what Dorothy Nelkin calls the “social power” of information, personal privacy merits protection from employers, insurers, researchers, health-care providers, schools, businesses, and government.

II.

The delivery of genetic services to members of racial minority groups raises important questions. I would like to highlight two such questions. First, in view of the past mistakes of the scientific and medical communities, can anyone fully trust scientists to study non-white Americans without racial bias? Second, can health-care providers adequately serve non-white Americans, knowing that many are uneasy about science, formal medicine, and explorations of human health and intellect? Recent service as a member of the National Institutes of Health’s National Human Genome Research Institute’s National Advisory Council for Human Genome Research (NCHGR) brought these questions into sharp relief. As a member of the Council, I frequently reflected on the implications for minority groups of the nation’s portfolio of scientific, social scientific, and humanistic research relating to genetics. A number of leading experts agree that a policy emphasis on genetic testing should be closely examined for its warrant and risks.

III.

What are we really like? What are our biological natures? How are we different from one another? Questions of this ilk have their origins in wonder about “God’s creation.” Yet knowledge of the answers that scientists and scholars once gave to questions like these may make some people of color less anxious to listen to current experts and quite unable to trust them.

The history of human achievement has been marred by the dissemination of a good deal of scholarly and scientific nonsense about inherited

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traits. A case in point is the set of texts purporting to report on the biological characteristics of the disparate races of humanity. One such text, selected at random, is an article on the "Negro" published early in the present century in the thirteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica.*

Citing learned authorities the article asserted that: “Mentally the negro is inferior to the white.” The Negro is subject to “indolence” and “lethargy” perhaps due to “premature closing of the cranial sutures and lateral pressure of the frontal bone” or because, “[a]fter puberty sexual matters take the first place in the negro’s life.” Negroes “far surpass white men in acuteness of vision, hearing, direction and topography.”

But the Negro is like “a child, normally good-natured and cheerful, but subject to sudden fits of emotion and passion during which he is capable of performing acts of singular atrocity . . . .” When it comes to hair, the Negro is like neither the white man nor the higher ape; for those two have true hair, whereas the Negro head is capped by a kind of wool, a “woolly” or “frizzly” pile capable of being felted. Finally, “[t]he recognized leaders of the [Negro] race are almost invariably persons of mixed blood, and the qualities which have made them leaders are derived certainly in part and perhaps mainly from their white ancestry.”

Have the “scientific” images of persons of African descent contained in the quoted passages been utterly eradicated from science, from scholarship, health-care, from popular culture, and from ordinary belief? Geneticists now know that there is no race blood and no single race gene. But there are people on the lookout for evidence that Blacks are genetically inferior to Whites in intellect and that Blacks have criminal proclivities fixed in their genetic make-ups. My impression is that many people of color do not trust science or scientists. When it comes to genetics, one impediment to trust may be the cultural gap between the creators of gene science and the consumers of gene science. Regardless of race and sex, we are all potential consumers of genetic information. But the creators of genetic information, the researchers, are mainly men, and mainly White. The people with the largest labs, who receive the

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10 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 344 (13th ed. 1926).
11 *Id.* at 344.
12 *Id.*
13 *Id.* at 345.
14 *Id.*
15 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 344, 344 (13th ed. 1926).
16 *Id.* at 346.
largest federal grants, who hire and train the young scientists and doctors are mainly men and mainly White. Heath-care is multicultural, science is less so.18

Closing the demographic gap between scientists and consumers could make a difference in the willingness of the public to trust scientists and their products. So, too, could a greater voice in public issues. I experienced keen disappointment when I learned a few years ago how few top gene scientists had bothered to speak out against claims that science showed that reproduction by poor minority women was lowering the average IQ.19 I heard some scientists explain their silence by saying that they were not interested in popular politics and that they thought the distortion of research by popularizers was too obvious for comment. But those responses left me feeling betrayed and abandoned.

The history of racism in science and scholarship demands that researchers react vocally to claims about the implications and uses of their pure research. Science is the interpretation of nature. I believe many African Americans are understandably ambivalent about nature, their place in it, and the enterprise of its interpretation. Blacks of my generation spent our childhoods hearing mostly from Whites that we are lazy by nature, less intelligent by nature, more prone to moral corruption and criminality than Whites by nature, more impulsive, more dependent, promiscuous, and more prone to noxious diseases than Whites by nature. We grew up afraid of ourselves, secretly ashamed of ourselves, but suspicious and resentful of scientific and clinical interpretations of our natures.

Scientists can make mistakes. We know that what is deemed knowledge in one generation can look like superstition and prejudice in another. This Symposium contains a great deal of information about the misuses of science and scientific information relating to genetics, about the potential for clinical abuses, and about government complicity. In a positive, forward-looking vein, the Symposium contains ideas about how health-care professionals and researchers can serve people of color in good faith.

Some kinds of genetic testing, evaluation, and screening can be useful. For example, when a child is born with multiple abnormalities, genetic testing can confirm a diagnosed syndrome and thereby secure more appropriate health-care. But as the Symposium demonstrates, at least four key issues surround the evaluation of genetic testing: (1) whether genetic testing practices are based on accurate information and research, rather

19 See generally JONES supra note 8.
than on myth, stereotype and prejudiced interpretations; (2) whether society provides equity in access to genetic testing with clear health benefits; (3) whether the delivery of genetic testing and other services is voluntary and appropriately respects the dignity, privacy, and confidentiality of individuals and families; and (4) whether there can be equal respect for the choices people of color make on the basis of genetic information, especially if those choices are different from the choices whites make. I have listed four multifaceted issues. This excellent symposium promises to identify and develop even more.