Socially Responsible Research at the Intersection of Genetics & Social Science

Presented by:

Michelle N. Meyer, J.D., Ph.D

Pre-Consortium Ethical Issues

- Each cohort obtains IRB approval to contribute data to consortium
- Does original consent encompass consortium research?
  - Increased informational risks?
  - New research questions/aims? E.g., Havasupai

Ethical Issues in Behavioral Genetics Research

Individual and Group Harms

- Stigma (though gene-trait associations can *de*stigmatize, e.g., "naturalizing" homosexuality)
- Discrimination (education, employment, insurance)
- Other troubling outcomes of gene-trait associations (e.g., neglect of environmental contributors to social problems)

Behavioral trait selection and alteration

- Historical background: state-coerced marital and reproductive decisions
- Contemporary worry: widening inequality gaps through parental choice & access

Legal culpability, punishment & prediction

- Historical examples: XYY males; MAOA
- Exculpation and inculpation

Why Genetic Research on Social Science Traits?

- Better understanding of human behavior
- Gene-trait associations can lead to beneficial genetic, medical & environmental interventions
  - E.g., intelligence: Dyslexia, PKU, Fragile X
- Likely technically infeasible to select/alter behavioral traits in the normal range
- Most likely outcome: Confirming the null hypothesis.
- UK citizen poll: most say behavioral genetics should not be limited (Nuffield 2002)
- Someone will do it (is doing it) — and it matters who

Responsible Communication of Science

If bad outcomes (e.g., stigma) occur, likely via miscommunication

Behavioral genetics researchers have *extra* ethical duty to help ensure accurate, complete, balanced, accessible reporting of results at all stages (conference, publication, media)

Avoiding Miscommunication: Beyond "The gene for X"

- Multiple determinants of population variance: Genetic & environmental influences, gene-environment interaction & correlation
- Individual differences & molecular genetics: Likely many genes, each with very small effect
- Predisposition (likely alterable) vs. determinism

Responsible Communication of Science

Failure to replicate, publication bias & data sharing

- Treat first reports of gene-trait associations with extreme caution, pending replication
- Publish or otherwise disseminate negative results

Avoiding Miscommunication: Media & the Public

- Review the article, or at least your quotations, prior to publication
- Read media coverage of your research; affirmatively correct errors, misleading statements