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Bio-information: databases, privacy and the fight against crime



Box 15.3 Activity: Devil's advocate

Do you think the European Court was right to argue that the DNA of those who haven't been convicted of a crime should not be kept on the NDNAD?

Having decided on the view to which you tend, consider the arguments that someone holding the opposite view might use against you. Do any sway you?



Box 15.4 Activity: Small group discussion

The European Court argued that those never convicted of a crime have the right to privacy and that this is violated by keeping their DNA on the NDNAD.

The Law Lords argued that the NDNAD exists to help solve crimes for which no one has been convicted. As everyone must be deemed innocent of such crimes, no distinction can be made between the DNA of those who have, and those who haven't, been convicted of a crime.

Divide participants into small groups and ask the groups to discuss which side they are on. Groups should appoint a spokesperson to report back to the group.



Box 15.5 Activity: Paired discussion

If you found that you didn't have the genes for musical ability would this dissuade you from learning to play an instrument or from joining a choir?

Do you think it would dissuade others?

Do you think the government should fund the musical education of those whose genes suggest they have no musical talent?



Box 15.6 Activity: Creative writing

If a 'murder' gene were found, one that correlated almost exactly with a pathological inability to empathise with others and an enjoyment of torture and killing, would this justify treating a child as a criminal and imprisoning it, despite its being, at the time of incarceration, entirely innocent?

Write a 500-word story from the point of view of such a child or one of its parents.



Box 15.7 Activity: Group discussion

On 14 January 2005 Larry Summers, then President of Harvard, made a speech that included the following two sentences:

'It does appear that on many human attributes – height, weight, propensity for criminality, IQ, mathematical ability, scientific ability – there is relatively clear evidence that ... there is a difference [between] a male and female population.'²⁴

'There is reasonably strong evidence of taste differences between little girls and little boys that are not easy to attribute to socialisation.'

In February 2006, partly as a result of such remarks, Summers was forced to resign.

Consider what would happen if science were to provide genetic evidence for Summers' claim about the differences between the male and female mind.

The discussion might be facilitated by means of the following questions:

- Could genetic evidence show that *all* men have scientific ability or that *no* woman does?
- If women were demonstrated to be statistically less likely to have scientific ability does this suggest that less money should be spent on science education for women or that *more* money should be spent on women to bring them up to scratch?
- Should such findings dissuade women from considering a career in science?
- Would such findings be so 'politically incendiary' they should be suppressed?
- Is there any scientific finding so politically incendiary it should be suppressed?

**Box 15.8 Activity: DVD-watching**

Get hold of a DVD of the film GATTACA and arrange a showing of it followed by a group discussion of how likely it is that such a scenario could become a reality.

**Box 15.9 Activity: Creative writing**

Write a short story – perhaps a funny one – in which you imagine you are trying to escape from your life, but are constantly surprised by people who know your name and all sorts of personal information about you.

**Box 15.11 Activity: Group discussion**

This house believes that a universal database would be a serious threat to civil liberties.

Sides might be allocated to participants, or they might choose their own sides.

**Box 15.12 Activity: Paired reflection**

Imagine it is the year 2035 and that we have successfully identified many of the genetic variations correlated with personality, behavioural traits, susceptibilities to disease, responses to drugs and allergens, etc.

Further imagine that a sample of everyone's DNA is held on a database to which all government departments have access.

Working with a partner:

- (i) list the benefits that could be derived from governmental access to such a database;
- (ii) list the problems, if any, that might arise from governmental access to such a database.

**Box 15.14 Activity: Personal reflection and presentation**

Would you want to know if you had the combination of ApoE4 and TOMM40 that greatly increases your chances of inherited Alzheimer's?⁴⁴

Over the next week keep a notebook in which to jot down thoughts about how you would respond to such a discovery. Be alert to mentions of Alzheimer's in the news or the papers, talk to people whose relatives have Alzheimer's, check out the websites of organisations devoted to Alzheimer's.

At the end of the week give a short (5 minute) presentation of your decision and the reasons for it.

Alternatively a poll might be conducted and used to stimulate a group discussion.

**Box 15.16 Activity: Web-wandering**

All participants should wander round the web looking for incidents where an individual's knowledge of their genome has not been an unmitigated blessing. Bring the results back to the group for a 'show and tell'.

**Box 15.17 Activity: Discussion topic**

George Best, called by many the greatest ever English footballer, was an alcoholic. He had a liver transplant in 2002 but he couldn't stop drinking and died in 2005, aged 59, of cirrhosis of the liver.⁵⁴

Best was able to afford private healthcare. But others aren't. Should drinkers who refuse to give up drinking be treated on the NHS for drinking-related conditions?

If they are alcoholics does this alter the situation?

**Box 15.20 Activity: Small group discussion**

Is it more important to protect the privacy of individuals or to fight crime? Should police and security forces have access (perhaps on court order) to the identity of those who donate DNA to such biobanks? Or will this compromise research by making it unlikely that people will donate, or at least that people from marginalised groups will donate?

Divide participants into small groups and ask them to discuss this issue and to appoint a spokesperson to report back to the whole group on their decisions.

**Box 15.21 Activity: Discussion topic⁶⁶**

Would the fact that so many respectable geneticists and other scientists have signed up to publish their DNA profiles and other details openly on the web encourage you to do likewise?

Does their doing this suggest that none of these scientists is worried about the arguments of those concerned about civil liberties?

Does this mean we shouldn't be concerned either?

**Box 15.22 Activity: Paired reflection**

With a partner ask whether you think that those afraid of allowing others access to their DNA are being misled by a misplaced belief in genetic determinism or by a failure to recognise that they leave their DNA everywhere?