

Defining the Canadian DNA Data Bank: A Sociological Perspective

Neil Gerlach

The social meaning of this [DNA] information in the 1990s must be reconsidered in the context of an increasing sense of crisis – over criminal violence, the cost of health care services, the quality of education and the general state of the economy These economic and social imperatives are enhancing the social value of predictive testing and reinforcing the power of biological information well beyond the clinical context (Nelkin and Tancredi, 1994, pp. 160-161).

Genetics is no longer a science restricted to arcane laboratory processes. As Dorothy Nelkin and Lawrence Tancredi point out, it is rapidly entering the public sphere through a set of institutional processes involving primarily the criminal justice system, the health care system, and the pharmaceutical and agricultural industries. As DNA becomes an object of legislation, scientific analysis, and market exchange, the problem arises of how to make sense of it as a social and cultural phenomenon, as well as a scientifically defined object. While governmental and economic institutions struggle to define this relatively new entity, social meanings develop around it, which in turn have important implications for how DNA enters into the public imaginary. Therefore, attempts by institutions to name and frame the social meanings of DNA have significant governmental impacts on the relationship between citizens and the state.

Currently, one of the most direct applications of DNA technology in the Canadian public sphere is within the criminal justice system. In 1995, the federal government passed Bill C-104, amending the Canadian *Criminal Code* to empower police to seize DNA samples from suspects of certain designated of-

fences. In 1998, Bill C-3 was passed, establishing a DNA data bank for the storage of both biological samples and genetic information from convicted offenders of designated offences. The policy process around these pieces of legislation forms an interesting case study of how DNA comes to mean certain things through institutional processes of negotiation. How do the framing strategies involved in the policy-making process operate to produce certain meanings around the DNA data bank? What are the broader social power implications of the knowledge system developing around the DNA data bank?

Specifically, I am interested in mapping the discursive framework developing around DNA data banking as it passes through the policy process, and analyzing the potential impacts of that framework on public understandings of the roles of criminal justice within society. Through an examination of the policy documents involved in the Canadian government's DNA data bank public consultation process, I find that there are four primary frameworks of meaning that emerge from the texts: privacy, surveillance, scientific objectivity, and administrative efficiency. These frames work to structure the social