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## Project Synopsis:

### Explanations in Genetics: Causality and Accountability in Complex Disorders

This interdisciplinary project involving the Institute of Medical Genetics, the Health Communication Research Centre (HCRC) and other collaborators aims to examine different explanatory models put forward to account for the increasing prevalence of common complex disorders in developed and developing societies. The project (2004-2007) is funded by the Wellcome Trust.

In relation to the causes of common complex disorders, the scientific community, other community-based organisations and the media at large engage in a debate in which genetics versus lifestyle versus fetal programming figure as the three main 'explanations'. In this project we wish to clarify the way in which concepts of genes, the environment and fetal programming are drawn upon as explanatory resources in the biomedical sciences, in healthcare service provision, and in more popular lifestyle debates. Abstract differences in perspectives on these topics can have far-reaching practical consequences for health policies and planning, for setting research agendas, and for attributions of blame or responsibility for personal ill-health. Our approach broadly falls under discourse and rhetorical analysis of contemporary expert and lay publications, later substantiated by interviews with key players representing the communities of stakeholders.

There are clear differences in the incidence of some common complex disorders such as diabetes, hypertension and coronary artery disease between populations, and contrasting ideas about disease causation can be used to justify different approaches to service provision in different communities. As these considerations are particularly relevant in relation to South Asian and socio-economically deprived communities in the UK, and to aboriginal and indigenous populations in Australia and North America, special emphasis will be given to studying how these groups' selective use of evidence leads to justifications for specific policies or advocating particular lifestyles.

Our key research questions are:

- What causal explanations of the common complex disorders (especially diabetes, coronary artery disease, and hypertension) are given in the different professional and lay literatures?
- How are the three principal scientific explanations (genes, diet/lifestyle, fetal programming) distributed across different accounting practices?
- How do researchers explain the relative emphasis within the research community on the three categories of explanation being considered?
- How are these explanations linked with recommendations for public health policy, the setting of a research agenda, or individual action?
- How do different groups draw upon the available evidence to justify claims and assertions about health policy, investments in research, and individual behaviour?

Overall, the goal of the project will be to provide an account of the motivational relevancies at work in the construction of knowledge about the causation of the complex disorders, integrating the sociology and philosophy of science with questions of ethnicity and the representation of policy relevance in the context of genetics.

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