

The Discourse of DNA:

The stories people tell about participating (or not) in a genetic biobank

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Student Workshop & Lunch: 12-1:15 pm

Biotechnology Center, Room 102

Lecture: 2-4 pm

Drinko 402

Refreshments to follow

Abstract: This paper reports the results of a linguistic analysis of interviews with persons who were asked to contribute DNA samples to a genetic biobank; some did contribute while others declined. We compare this folk discourse of genetic research to the expert discourse reflected in an extensive biomedical literature. Our most significant finding concerns the social nature of giving informed consent: whereas medical research practice treats it as a discrete event, our subjects talk about it as an open-ended, ongoing, and unstable discursive process. Our subjects also expound folk theories of genetics and discuss their views of the act of contributing a sample, revealing some remarkable folk-legal theories of that transaction. In the course of doing so, they circulate stories about DNA from a variety of sources: their own lives (for example, stories about relatives with heritable diseases); discussions with family and friends; the news media; and popular culture (with *CSI* and *Law and Order* figuring prominently). Their tellings are rich with performance, metaphor, and metacommentary. The subjects adapt and combine these circulating stories into new narratives that vividly express their own hopes and fears about genetic research.



John M. Conley is William Rand Kenan, Jr. Professor of Law at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he teaches biotechnology, intellectual property, scientific evidence, and professional responsibility. He has also taught anthropology regularly at Duke University. He has published extensively on the anthropological and linguistic study of the American legal system (with William O'Barr), the culture of business and finance, scientific evidence, and the law of intellectual property as applied to emerging technologies. Much of his recent research focuses on the legal, cultural, and linguistic aspects of genetic research. He is also of counsel to Robinson, Bradshaw & Hinson of Charlotte, NC, where his practice focuses on life sciences and intellectual property.

