

Risk Communication in Familial Cancer:

The Discursive Management of Uncertainty in Genetic Counselling

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Abstract

This thesis deals with the communication of cancer risk in genetic counselling sessions. There are two primary foci that form threads throughout both the theoretical and empirical chapters of the dissertation. The first concerns the meaning of risk as it manifests in familial cancer. In particular, there is a lack of a sound theoretical grounding for the probabilistic aspect of risk that is evident in many forms of risk communication. The thesis aims to illustrate the problem constituted by this lack of theoretical clarity. A discursive approach to probability is developed, which offers to untangle much of the conflation that exists in language used to communicate risks, probabilities, and uncertainties. The application of such an approach is demonstrated through an analysis of transcripts from genetic counselling sessions. The second focus concerns the manifestation of agency in genetic counselling. In particular, transcripts of genetic counselling sessions are analysed as to the agency that is available to individuals on three dimensions: (i) the construction of knowledge claims in genetic counselling, particularly with regards to statements dealing with uncertainty, (ii) the management of risk and uncertainty, and (iii) decision-making. As most decisions faced by clients arise from attending genetic counselling, it is concluded that clients' agency is highly constrained when genetic counselling is understood as a process of assisting decision-making. However, genetic counselling can be seen to enable agency when it is conceptualised as a process aimed at making available new medical technologies for the purpose of addressing clients' own concerns. These arguments have relevance to debates on nondirectiveness, which has long been upheld as a guiding principle of genetic counselling.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Signed:

Date:

Kieran O'Doherty

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