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UNIVERSITET

Genetics and Human Behavior

IV annual Swedish Symposium on Biomedicine, Ethics and Society

When Does Genetics Play a Role in Understanding Human Behavior?

Sandhamn Hotell & Konferens, May 27-28, 2002

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EXPLAINING UNIVERSALS AND VARIATION IN HUMAN BEHAVIOR: IS BIOLOGY TO ANTHROPOLOGY AS FORMALISM TO SUBSTANTIVISM?

Whether our intention is to identify universals or to explain variation in human behavior, references to genetics are of very limited help. The search for human universals inevitably results in abstractions far removed from the cultural specificities and personal idiosyncracies of actual human behavior. If all human behavior to some extent is mediated by idiosyncracies of *meaning*, there can be no such thing as a purely biologically motivated act that can be exhaustively accounted for by reference to the constitution of human organisms. Nor can even organisms be usefully accounted for by reference to their genes, as "genotypes" exist only as abstractions from ontogenetic processes that from the very outset are interactive, relational, and *situated* in specific environments. References to biology and genetics in explanations of human behavior thus necessarily strip away the contextual details that would be crucial for a full account. Universalism and relativism should not be seen as alternative creeds but as different levels of understanding, reminiscent of formalism and substantivism in economic theory. However, much like formal, neoclassic theory in economics, attempts to define human nature in terms of biological universals continue to ring vacuous and trivial in relation to the semiotic complexity of the ethnographic record. With the exception of identifiable genetic deviations producing particular syndromes, neither can genetics account for personal variation in behavior. The practical usefulness of genetics in explaining substantive, human behavior can thus be said to be negligible.