



Consortium of Social Science Associations

President's Bioethics Commission Meets on Ethical Implications of Neuroscience Advances

June 16, 2014

The [Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues](#) held a meeting on June 9 and 10 that focused on the ethical and moral implications of advances in neuroscience research. President Obama [charged](#) the Commission with considering these topics in light of the Administration's Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies (BRAIN) Initiative. The Commission is chaired by Amy Gutmann, President of the University of Pennsylvania. More information on the meeting, including a webcast and presenters' slides, is available [here](#).

During a session on neuroscience data sharing and access, Giorgio Ascoli, Center for Neural Informatics, Structures, and Plasticity at George Mason University, noted that neuroscientists are often reluctant to share data, even in cases where there are no privacy or logistical barriers to prevent easy sharing. When scientists were asked to contribute to George Mason's web repository of digital neuron reconstructions, less than a third agreed to share their data. Helen Nissenbaum, New York University, described a model of privacy that defines it as the appropriate flow of information for a given context (so, the personal information appropriate for sharing in a medical setting is different from what is appropriate in a job interview). Using this framework, evaluating the privacy implications of new technologies and discoveries becomes a question of evaluating the disruptions to the information flow. Factors to be considered include people's interests, preferences, and desires; ethical and political values; and context-specific ends and values. Nissenbaum cautioned that privacy disruptions are not by definition bad and should not only be thought about in terms of harms; they also have the potential to preserve and promote social institutions.

As part of a panel considering the potential of neuroscience research, Gregory Simon, Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, suggested that the potential advances of the BRAIN Initiative could lead to a better causal understanding of mental illness. Simon predicted that we will better understand the developmental nature of mental health conditions, be able to determine a person's vulnerability to mental illness, no longer rely on categorical distinctions of various illnesses, and be better able to personalize interventions to make them effective. Some of the ethical questions raised by these developments will include how to balance resources for treatment versus prevention, how far to go in "protecting" those vulnerable to developing mental illnesses, how to adapt policies based on outdated diagnostic categories, and how to appropriately price interventions for a given degree of risk. Patrick Corrigan, Illinois Institute of Technology, focused on the stigma surrounding mental illness. He explained that attempts to reduce stigma by classifying mental illness as a "brain disorder" don't work because

people assume that such disorders are not treatable. Instead, research has shown that the most effective method for improving people's attitudes is direct contact with someone who has a mental illness.

Joshua D. Greene, Harvard University, spoke during a session on the implications of neuroscience advances for ethics and moral decision making. He observed that educating people on how the brain works as a physical system is correlated with less punitive attitudes (they tend to be less willing to support punishments that only serve to make "bad" people suffer). Alfred R. Mele, Florida State University, noted that people who have been told that free will doesn't exist misbehave more frequently. And while some studies have found that our brains may make some decisions before we are aware of them, Mele expressed skepticism that these results imply that free will doesn't exist. He recommended researchers be careful not to exaggerate or universalize their findings.

