



# Genetic Attribution and Mental illness: Implications for Moral Agency and Moral Responsibility from the perspective of an African philosophy

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# Overview

- Background
- Stigma in African Genomics Study
- African philosophy
  - Personhood
- Implications for moral agency, moral responsibility and stigma

# Background

- Possibility that genomic research may impact stigma, blame and responsibility associated with psychiatric conditions.
- Ongoing debate in Western ethical, legal and philosophical literature.
- Limited research on this topic in Africa, despite the increase in genomics research on the continent.

## **Genes and Stigma: The Connection Between Perceived Genetic Etiology and Attitudes and Beliefs About Mental Illness**

Jo C. Phelan, Rosangely Cruz-Rojas  
Marian Reiff  
Columbia University



### **HHS Public Access**

Author manuscript

*Behav Genet.* Author manuscript; available in PMC 2020 March 01.

Published in final edited form as:

*Behav Genet.* 2019 March ; 49(2): 128–135. doi:10.1007/s10519-018-9916-0.

### **Behavior Genetics and Attributions of Moral Responsibility**

Kathryn Tabb<sup>1,2,\*</sup>, Matthew S. Lebowitz<sup>1</sup>, and Paul S. Appelbaum<sup>1</sup>

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Behavior Genetics (2019) 49:123–127  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10519-019-09952-z>

#### **GUEST EDITORIAL**



### **Genetics and Human Agency: The Philosophy of Behavior Genetics Introduction to the Special Issue**

Eric Turkheimer<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 4 March 2019  
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#### **Genetics and Human Agency**

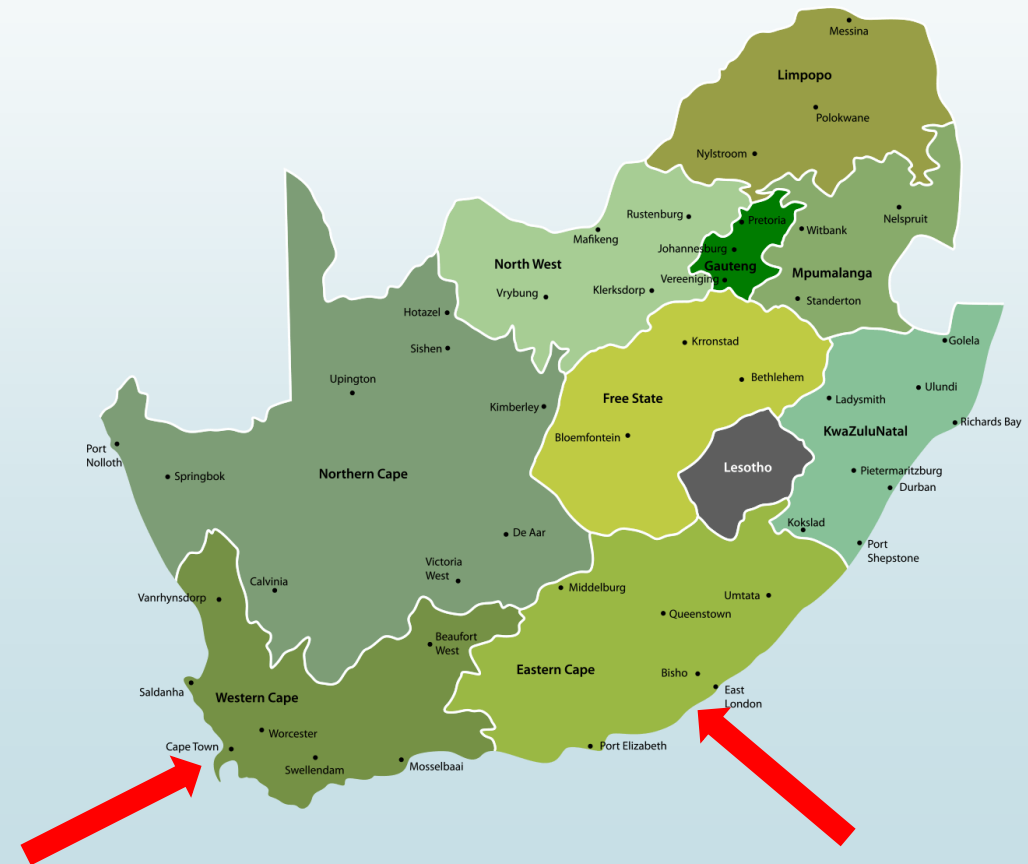
hereditarian answer is that extraversion is in some (unspecified) sense fixed at conception. By extension, our psycho-

# Context

## Africa



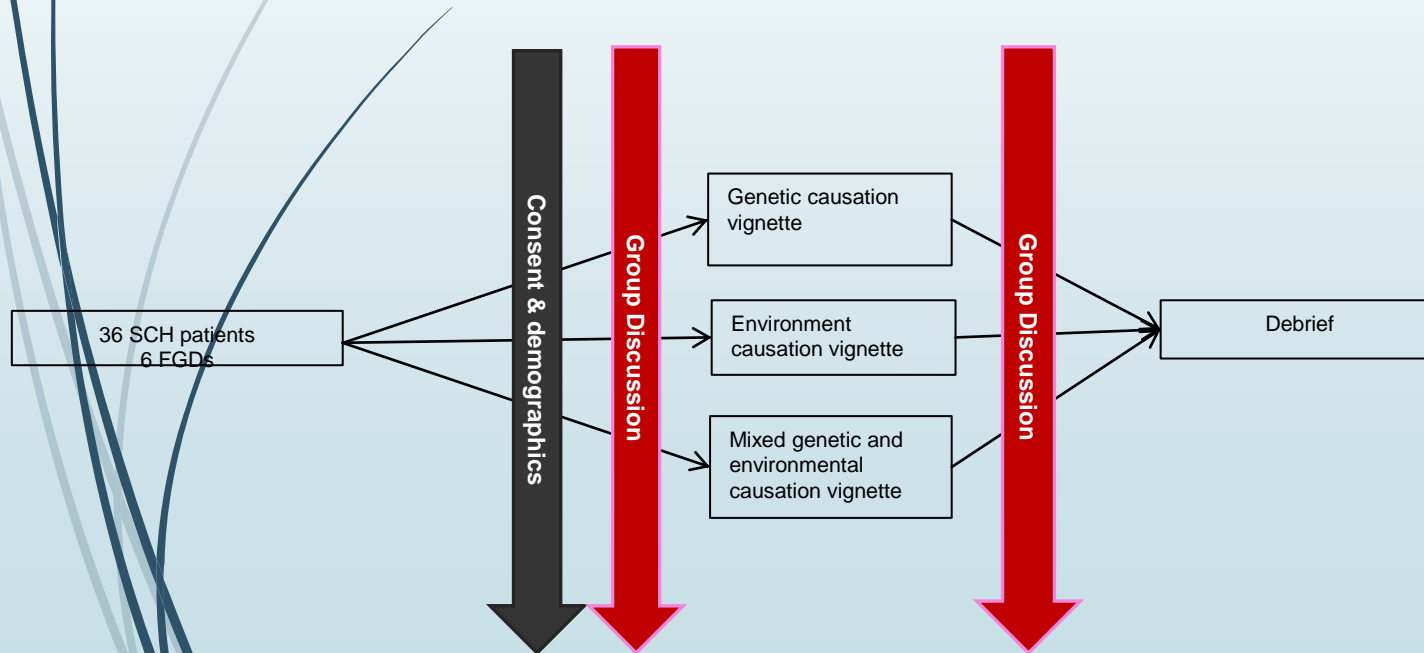
## South Africa



# Stigma in African Genomics Research

**Aim:** Exploring how a genetic attribution to disease is related to stigma experiences of people Xhosa with schizophrenia in South Africa

## Methodology



## Demographics

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHICS (n= 36)	
Age Range	20 - 49 years
Mean	33.92 years
Sex	
Male	34 (88.89%)
Female	2 (5.56%)
Highest education level	
• Tertiary studies	2 (5.55%)
• Secondary school	30 (83.34 %)
• Primary school	4 (11.11%)
Employment	
• Unemployed	32 (88.89%)
• Employed in low paid job	3 (8.33%)
• Professional job	0 (0%)



## Findings: Genetic understandings of mental illness

Most participants were able to define genetics, and some linked genetics to disease causation.

- ▶ *“Like if maybe someone in the person’s family has been sick before, then they too end up being sick because of having the **same genes**.” (P. 6: FGD6)*
- ▶ *“...sometimes I think schizophrenia happens genetically. Maybe because of **your bloodline** or **heredity**. So it is something like that, I think so.” (P. 5 FGD2)*





# Stigma in African Genomics research on Schizophrenia and Rheumatic Heart Disease in Africa Project

Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-020-01875-z>

ORIGINAL PAPER



## Exploring how a genetic attribution to disease relates to stigma experiences of Xhosa patients with schizophrenia in South Africa

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### Abstract

**Background** Over the past three decades, a range of international stakeholders have highlighted the possibility that genomic research may impact stigma associated with psychiatric disorders. Limited research has been conducted in Africa to investigate this relation.

**Method** In the present study, using focus group discussions, we explored the relation between genetic attribution and stigma among 36 Xhosa people with schizophrenia. We addressed three main questions: (1) What causal beliefs do Xhosa people with schizophrenia use to explain their illness and to what extent do genetic explanations play a role in these beliefs? (2) What are the internalised stigma experiences of Xhosa people with schizophrenia? (3) How do genetic explanations relate to stigma experiences, if at all?

**Results** Most participants were able to define genetics and some linked genetics to disease causation. Despite adequate knowledge of genetics and an emphasis on genetic explanations of schizophrenia in the study, most participants held a multitude of causal explanations including: psychosocial, environmental, and cultural. Moreover, participants rarely mentioned disease cause when describing their stigma experiences.

**Discussion** For this population group, there was no straight-forward relation between a genetic attribution and stigma. Therefore, we did not find evidence that genetic attribution may significantly increase stigma. Although North American and European literature provides conflicting evidence regarding this relation, there is increased consensus that biomedical explanations for psychiatric disorders may reduce blame. This study found evidence supporting that consensus. This study provides an empirical foundation to inform ongoing work on the psychosocial implications of psychiatric genomics research in non-Western contexts.

**Keywords** Genetic attribution · Schizophrenia · Stigma · Xhosa people





# African philosophy

- Philosophical literature holds a general consensus on the assumption that an African worldview is primarily communal (Wiredu & Gyekye, 1992).
- Descriptive and normative dimensions are based on specific meaning systems and values that guide the Afrocentric paradigm which governs African people's social belonging (Adjei, 2019).
- Not all Africans share the same viewpoint of communalism, as there is much diversity across different African cultures. However, many cultures, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa hold similar communitarian beliefs and values.



# Afro-communal understandings of Personhood

- Moral conception: A human being becomes more or less of a person to the extent that she values communal relationships.
- Ontological conception: A person can be understood in the Akan culture as being made up of three distinct entities: the *okra* (the soul), *sunsum* (spirit) and the *nipadua* (body) (Gyekye, 1995).
- Across the myriad understandings of personhood among many cultures in sub-Saharan Africa, what seems to be common is that the state of being a person in African literature transcends the capacity to reason, self-awareness or one's biological or genetic make-up (Musana, 2018: p. 25). Additionally, it is not lost through death, but continues to be inextricably bound up in the bundle of life.
- African personhood is deeply relational, to other humans (Xhosa expression = *Umntu ngumntu ngabantu*), the community and the invisible cosmic realm.



<https://www.aperianglobal.com/debunking-common-myths-stereotypes-africa/>

# Impact on moral agency

**Stephen Baffour Adjei** 

University of Education, Kumasi Campus

Article

## Conceptualising personhood, agency, and morality for African psychology

**Theory  
& Psychology**

Theory & Psychology

2019, Vol. 29(4) 484–505

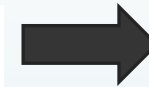
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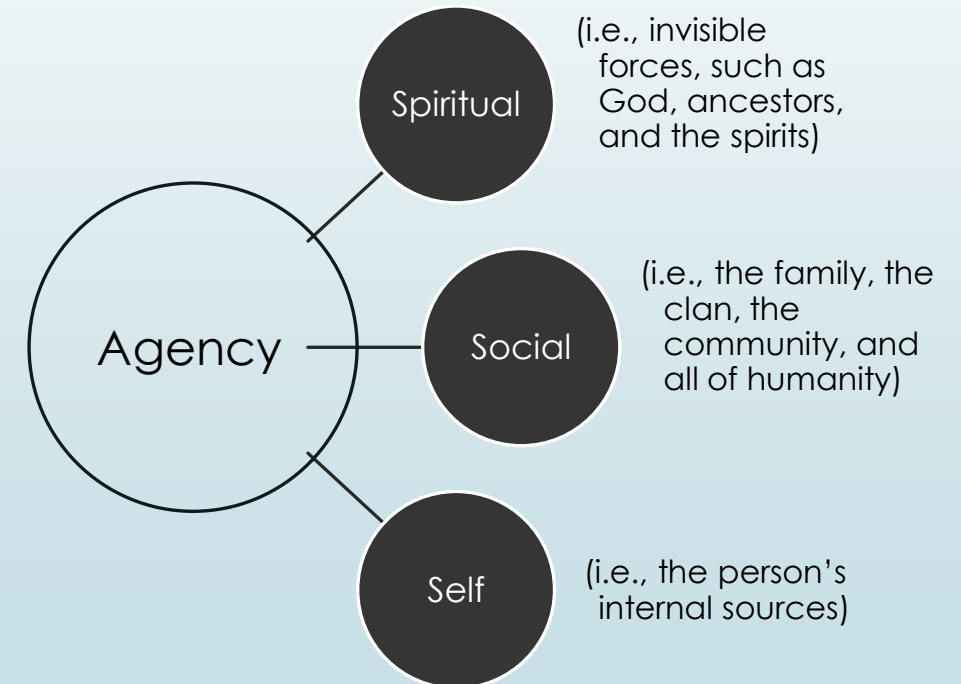
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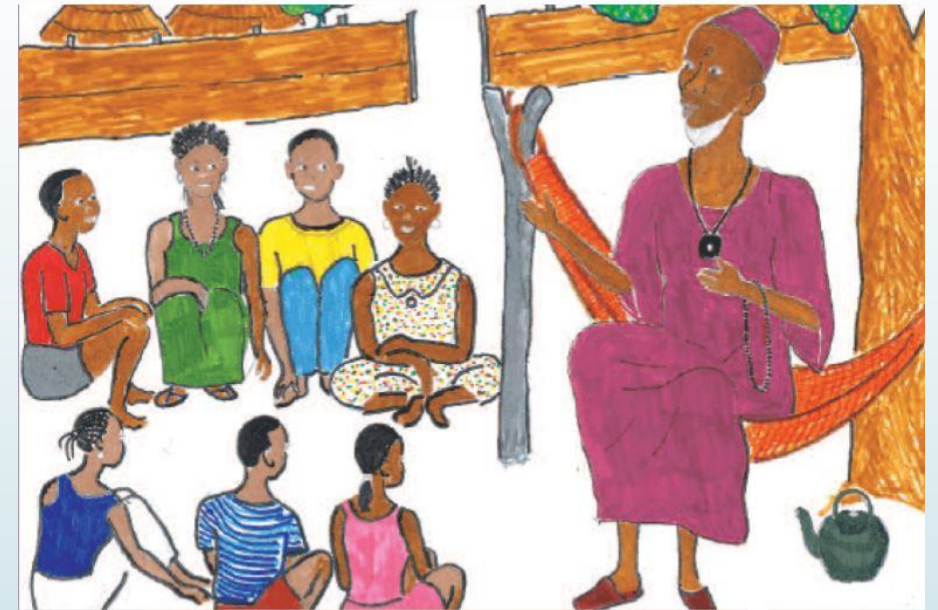
## 3 forms of agency



# Impact on moral responsibility

- Personhood (relational)
- Conceptualisations of mental illness onset (relational)
- Genetics (relational)
- Moral agency (relational)
- Moral responsibility (relational)

In an African worldview a mentally ill person receives a great deal of care and support from their kinship. If they engage in unacceptable behaviour in the community it is first and foremost the family who takes on the responsibility to appease the offended person(s).



<https://www.wvi.org/senegal/publication/rights-and-duties-african-children>

# Ethical issues

*Different conceptualisations of causes of mental illness*

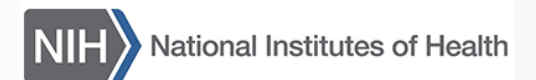
- Genetic
- Environmental
- Spiritual/Cultural
- - Bewitchment framework

Existing theoretical frameworks may be limited, for instance the *Biopsychosocial Framework* which places less emphasis on cultural understandings.

We need greater representation of African mental illness understandings and more involvement of African people in the developments of mental health theoretical frameworks.



# Enkosi and Thank You



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