FRIDAY, JAN. 25
DANIEL BENJAMIN
University of Southern California

Social-Science Genomics: A Primer and Progress Report

This talk will provide an overview of research at the intersection of genetics and the behavioral sciences. The talk will summarize what we have learned from research aimed at identifying genetic variants associated with behavioral traits. Two central lessons are that (i) the magnitude of the association between a typical behavioral trait and any particular genetic variant is extremely small, but (ii) the cumulative effects of many genetic variants can be substantial. To capture these cumulative effects, the results of a genome-wide association study are used to construct a polygenic score, which is an index of many genetic variants from across the genome. Many of the payoffs to the behavioral sciences from social-science genomics come from using a polygenic score as a measure of the genetic influences on a trait. Polygenic scores are beginning to be used in a wide range of applications, including controlling for genes when evaluating policies and studying how genes and environments interact.

BIO

Daniel Benjamin is an Associate Professor (Research) of Economics and Director of the Behavioral and Health Genomics Center at the University of Southern California. He is a behavioral economist whose research uses a wide range of methods, including mathematical modeling, conducting surveys, running experiments, and analyzing existing data. He is a Co-Founder and Co-Director of the Social Science Genetic Association Consortium, which promotes interdisciplinary collaboration and well-powered research in social-science genomics. Aside from research in social-science genomics, some current research topics include understanding errors people make in statistical reasoning, and exploring how best to use survey measures of subjective well-being to track national well-being and evaluate policies. Benjamin received his M.Sc. in Mathematical Economics from the London School of Economics in 2000, and his A.M. in Statistics and Ph.D. in Economics from Harvard University in 1999 and 2006, respectively.

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