With the emergence of websites offering genetic testing for ancestry, paternity and disease susceptibility directly to consumers and the continuing research into the associations between common genetic variants and disorders such as hypertension, dementia, and breast cancer, genetic knowledge is gaining new traction as a means of monitoring, labelling, and ranking people. This book focuses on the social and ethical implications of genetic knowledge and testing. Parents deciding whether or when to tell their children about inherited risks, family members grappling with the implications of genetic knowledge and its potential consequences for other kin, children negotiating the genetic legacy of parents and grandparents, health professionals seeking to be both non-directive while pushing clients to address the often tangled relational aspects of genetic risk. The authors of Genetic Testing analyse how individuals confronting inherited risk mobilize ideas about autonomy, blame and responsibility. They explore how these ideas are engaged “to either problematise or restore a socio-moral order that has [under neoliberalism] become fully enmeshed with concerns over the management of risk” (p.7).

Arribas-Ayllon, Sarangi and Clarke assert that genetic knowledge cannot be adequately understood as a medical or scientific object or as the transfer or application of genetic screening or testing results. Rather, instances and acts of genetic knowledge are always and diversely “mediated” through language and social interaction” (p.172). Drawing upon their combined expertise in psychology, communication theory, and clinical genetics, the authors examine genetic counselling interactions, reality television, and personal genomics websites and other spaces of genetic knowledge to highlight its mediated and contingent nature. Situating genetic knowledge and practices into context is crucial. As the authors argue, context is not just micro-context of personalities, preferences, and specific test results, nor is it the grand narrative of technological advances irrevocably changing or creating anew what it means to be human. Rather, context refers to the situated moral, material, and social conditions through which genetic knowledge is produced, disseminated and consumed. Diversely constituted, but not without recurring themes and strategies, emergent, and yet tied to longstanding domains of signification, the spaces of genetic knowledge and practice are complex, dynamic, and consequential.

Thoroughly researched, deftly theorized and rich with textual, narrative and visual data, Genetic Testing is a satisfying read. A key contributing factor is that the book’s comprehensive approach means there are at least five different themes which recur across the chapters. Taken together, these themes give the analysis considerable depth and scope. Taken individually, each theme offers a somewhat different trajectory through the analysis with the result that the book will likely be of value to readers from a range of
professional and academic backgrounds. One theme addresses established and emerging forms of genetic knowledge and testing. The authors discuss the historical development of genetic knowledge, the principles of inheritance, current facts and claims about the association between common disorders and genetic variants, types of genetic testing and carrier screening, and genetic counselling. Invaluable to all readers for understanding the nuanced analysis of the social and ethical implications of genetic testing, this information is presented clearly enough to be understood by readers without a background in clinical genetics.

A second theme concerns the multitude of spaces and ways in which people engage with, interpret, and act on genetic knowledge, especially regarding known or potential genetic risk. The authors address the legacy of early 19th century eugenics, the norms and challenges of contemporary clinical genetic counselling practice, and the movement of genetic knowledge into media and the public domain through personal genomics, online advertising and services for genetic testing, and the public spectacle of reality TV shows like Britain’s The Killer in Me. The inclusion of segments from transcripts of genetic counselling sessions provides a rich empirical basis for understanding familial and professional narratives as “relational encounters of signification” (p.172) in which notions of autonomy, blame and responsibility are crucial to both making meaning and managing social and moral relationships.

A third and especially compelling theme of the book for this reviewer examines the relationship between neoliberalism and genetic knowledge. Focusing on the United Kingdom, the authors position neoliberal discourses on economic efficiency, accountability, and the self-determining subject in relation to genetic technologies and health. Drawing striking parallels with, as well as crucial distinctions from, 19th century eugenics thinking, the authors (p.46) highlight the utopian, progressivist and deterministic assumptions which frame neoliberalism. The connections to genetic testing are clearly articulated: the neoliberal citizen is expected to be preoccupied with “the calculation of future harms… and to sustain one’s autonomy by assembling information, materials and practices into personalised strategies that identify and minimise one’s exposure to risk” (p. 38). Harnessed to anxieties about lurking pathology and to promises of greater self-knowledge and self-determination, the concept of ‘genetic risk’ is an increasingly powerful and consequential social force.

As a fourth theme, the book offers a fresh look at the ethical landscape of genetic testing and counselling, a landscape fraught with ethical dilemmas, social anxieties, competing individual desires, and sometimes contradictory cultural expectations and priorities. In place of a normative and principle-based ethics, the authors propose and explore a “situated communication ethics” (p.8) that is deeply attentive to the content as well as the context of genetic knowledge. An ethics which highlights genetic knowledge and practice as communicative systems orients us to how participants seek to bring about particular effects, such as being socially accountable, managing blame, and negotiating autonomy. The emphasis is not on conflict between or ambiguity among ethical principles, but on meaning making within diversely constituted relationships of power. In a chapter focusing on prenatal genetics, the authors insightfully examine how ethical challenges are represented and negotiated by genetic counselling professionals, many of whom seek to be “non-directive” at the same time that they want their clients “to generate complex relational understandings of the social and ethical implications of prenatal testing” (p.177).

The value of rhetorical discourse analysis, the approach used by the authors to analyse genetic knowledge and practice, is a fifth theme. Rhetorical discourse analysis draws attention to how visual, verbal, written communicative acts or interpretive practices are “embedded within a sphere of social accountability” (p.57). The central assumptions and concepts of rhetorical discourse analysis are clearly described and then applied throughout subsequent chapters to transcripts of counselling sessions, to website text and images, to reality television shows, and to professional accounts of ethics. Communicative elements such as categorization, character work, metaphor among others bring to light how individuals use language and
other acts of signification to bring about specific effects; that is, to negotiate blame, manage disclosure, privilege some meanings over others, justify present and future actions, and so on.

Overall, *Genetic Testing* presents a robust and stimulating analysis of the ethical, moral and social dilemmas of genetic knowledge. Only two issues stood out to this reviewer as somewhat underdeveloped. One, while the authors discuss in detail the negotiation of autonomy, responsibility, and blame in accounts of inherited risk between siblings, parent and child, and in counsellor-client interactions, less attention is given to spousal relationships. Two, although the question of how neoliberalism shapes contemporary genetics is central to their analysis, it is not explicit in their chapter addressing health professionals’ accounts of ethical challenges in prenatal genetics. There is some discussion in the concluding chapter of how neoliberal notions of risk and risk management influence professional ethics, but the absence of this key issue from the chapter on professional accounts is surprising. These two limitations aside, *Genetic Testing* is a book that goes a long way to helping us think in productive and systematic ways about the power of contemporary genetic knowledge.