

Short Sharp Science

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Bunfight over "warrior" gene



Alarm bells ring instantly in my head whenever I hear that someone's discovered a "gene" for this or that trait. So often, the association between the gene and the trait is extremely weak, and the trait doesn't materialise unless a whole host of lifestyle factors bring it out, such as stress, poverty, lack of education, lack of opportunity or being generally downtrodden in

society (see examples [here](#) and [here](#)).

Those alarm bells in my head ring even louder when **genes for negative traits** get linked somewhat uncritically to underprivileged **ethnic groups** who already get a bum rap in life.

Take this AFP headline yesterday: "[Warrior gene claimed to fuel violence in New Zealand Maori](#)". Oh dear. In essence, the story was based around new evidence that twice as many Maori men as European men have a so-called "Warrior" gene which makes them more aggressive (see [fallout from the story](#)).

Even assuming this to be factually correct, and without going into detail about the [gene itself](#), what does this say about Maori men? "They are going to be more aggressive and violent and more likely to get involved in risk-taking behaviour such as gambling," according to Rod Lea of the Institute of Environmental Science and Research in Wellington, quoted from a National Radio interview about his findings on Wednesday.

To his credit, Lea stressed the many other environmental factors unrelated to genetics that could aggravate violence, and acknowledged that in his view, the influence of the gene was "rather small".

The trouble is that even with all these admirable and entirely justified caveats, the overwhelming message is the one in the AFP headline, a message easily seized on to reinforce and justify prejudice against minorities. For me, it raises fundamental questions about **whether some avenues of research are best left un-trodden because what they reveal is bound to be socially and culturally incendiary, whatever the outcome. Or is it intellectually dishonest, even cowardly, not to investigate all aspects of the human condition?** Post a comment below and let me know what you think.

By *Andy Coghlan*

Posted by Sean at 10:35 | [Permalink](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [digg this](#) |

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Yes, it would be intellectually dishonest and cowardly not to go wherever the data takes you. When the data's out there we can argue about its meaning, but to censor the data because we fear the arguments would be gutless.

By  Sebastian on [August 10, 2006 11:55 AM](#)

It all comes down to Nature versus Nurture, doesn't it? You could argue that men are more prone to violence than women, but it doesn't mean that every single man is violent.

Genotype doesn't always get expressed (physically or in behaviour), so trying to predict an individual's behaviour based solely on genetics would be chancy at best.

Unless a subject is suffering from a mental illness, I think Nurture has more

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