

Discourses on indigeneity: The media, the warrior gene and aggressive Caucasians

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Abstract: As noted by Hook (2009), the hypothesis that a 'warrior gene' could predispose primates and men to "aggressive, impulsive and even violent behaviour" (Tracking the evolutionary history of a "Warrior Gene", 2004, p. 818) was linked to Māori males through a scientific research paper (Lea, & Chambers, 2007). Hook, in reviewing these papers, is interested in gauging the 'truth' of the hypothesis that Māori high levels of criminality might be due to the "expression of a warrior gene" and what that 'truth' might mean for Māori (Hook, 2009, p. 1). His article finds little substantive scientific proof for the hypothesis, and he looks at the risks of this issue from an eugenics perspective. This peer commentary addresses Hook's overarching theme that "Māori" might become defined as a treatable disease, in terms of Māori 'truths'. It examines how Māori are constructed in contemporary media discourses, and how these "regimes of truth" (Hall, 2006, p. 169) might drive public perception of Māori as a treatable or untreatable disease.

Keywords: health; indigeneity; Māori; media; warrior gene

A 'truth' is created through a sequence of statements that create a discourse on ideas or knowledge around a particular subject that then becomes widely accepted (Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1980; Hall, 2006). The 'truths' associated with any particular discourse are dependent upon the regard with which the proponents of the field of knowledge are held. In terms of the 'warrior gene', the dominant discourse is that of scientists from the field of medical research, generally regarded by society as highly reliable sources. Another source of reliable truths, in terms of the general populace, is the media (Chomsky, 2002).

When scientific medical researchers and the media discuss issues such as Māori and a warrior gene, the frame that is used for the discourse has been constructed through sequential statements built up over centuries within both the scientific and media fields. More latterly this construction also occurs through the extensive reiteration of these sequential statements through the mass communication pathways created by internet technology. These Western, or Eurocentric, discourses generally exclude Māori indigenous knowledge, because Māori have been subjected to the discourse rather than being the ones to employ it (Hall, 2006). Māori, and other indigenous peoples, have been subjected to a "cage of development" in terms of their 'civilisation' by Western society historically (Watts 1995, p. 66). Linking Māori to a 'warrior-gene' which has been presented as an explanation for aggressive behaviours in gorillas, helps to maintain the bars of that cage by providing the scientific rationale for a discourse on Māori as the medically proven 'uncivilised "others" in New Zealand society' (Watts, 1995, p. 65).

Māori, as with other indigenous groups and racial minority groups globally, are often portrayed in the media as "posing a threat to the "established order" of society (Wilson, 1995, pp. 43-44). Walker (2002) sees the role of the modern media as "supporting the hierarchy of Pākehā domination and Māori subordination" (p. 218). Certainly there is plenty of evidence to support both of these proposals. Even as recently as 2007 a group of Māori arrested on firearms charges were being headlined in the media with terms like 'guerrillas in the mist'. This mediated a perception of Māori as gorillas who needed caging and was evident in this headline, which reflected a famous movie title about saving gorillas in Africa, 'Gorillas in the mist'.

In 2003 the media spectacularly touted the Treaty of Waitangi, which is the formal document establishing British cohabitation with the Māori from 1840, as a “Weapon of Mass Distraction” (O’Sullivan, 2003). Of course we were supposed to read this as ‘Weapon of Mass Destruction’ given that it was printed above a picture of bombs dropping from the sky. The largest bomb was in fact three times larger than the others; and was the only one with blood red writing, which read “Treaty of Waitangi”. It was also at the height of the ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ media blitz accompanying America’s war on Iraq. New Zealand’s business leaders and the media created a public perception that Māori, through their Treaty of Waitangi, posed the single most challenging threat to the future of New Zealand economic development; and therefore were a significant threat to the established order of society.

New Zealand’s political leadership also have a history of constructing negative perceptions of Māori, sometimes purely to gain press attention for themselves. In 2009 the ACT political party have a coalition arrangement to support the government of New Zealand; their party leader is currently the Minister of Local Government. In a leaked memo from the ACT party in December 2003, their leadership outlined a media spectacular they were planning to use to gain more attention for themselves. ACT’s media plan included a negatively skewed focus on issues of Māori health and justice; policy areas ACT felt the media would assist in exploiting to attract “the mean spirited and fearful who want to demonise Māori” (Stephen Franks Leaked Memo, 2003). A few weeks later, on 28 January 2004, the leader of another political party used his first speech of the political year to attack aspects of Māori development as a “dangerous drift to racial separatism”; tacitly he used Māori-bashing as a media technique to get across his other political ideas (Armstrong, 2004).

New Zealand’s leadership has been complicit in creating what may be described as a ‘cage’ for Māori under-development based on a discourse that positions Māori as a threat to the established order of New Zealand society. This ‘regime of truth’ about Māori was constructed by political leaders, business leaders and the media. It created a fertile ground for negative perceptions towards Māori and the possibility of their having a warrior gene to grow roots. This regime was further enhanced by the position taken by some medical and health leaders in terms of attitudes to Māori health issues, as will be shown.

A discourse evolves through the “practice of truths” (Hall, 2006, p. 167). In 2000, a study in New Zealand found that a significant number of highly experienced psychiatrists admitted to believing that “... Māori were more biologically or genetically predisposed to ‘madness’ than others” (Johnston, 2000, p.143). This study is one of a number that shows a predisposition of some in the medical profession to withhold treatment for Māori, on questionable grounds. These psychiatrists have created a sequence of statements, and have practiced their particular ‘truth’ that Māori is an untreatable disease. They have added their medical and psychiatric based ‘truth’ into the broader ‘regime of truth’ constructed through the practices of political, business and media leaders in New Zealand.

‘Truths’ about Māori, in terms of the Eurocentric discourse on indigeneity that has evolved in Western democracies with indigenous populations, have constructed a cage within which Māori are perceived as under-developed, uncivilized, and as threats to the established order of society. Scientific and medical researchers, business and political leaders, medical and health leaders and the media have tacitly constructed Māori to create a negative public perception that adds to the development of this collection of sequential statements. This has resulted in a ‘regime of truth’ through which discourses within New Zealand society can perceive the possibility of Māori as a treatable and untreatable disease.

This ‘regime of truth’ has even gone global in the world of fiction. In his recent book titled “Next”, best-selling author Michael Crichton mentions the Māori Warrior gene. One of the characters describes the warrior gene as a gene for “anti-social personality disorder ... associated with violence and crime” (Crichton, 2006, p.297) and discusses research

suggesting that it is present in sixty percent of the Māori population. Another of Crichton's characters ponders whether he should risk getting into trouble for "demeaning a downtrodden ethnic minority" through promoting his perspectives of eugenics around an issue associated with "Māori genetics" (Crichton, 2006, p.298). This clearly takes the issue beyond science and into the world of popular and scientific fiction; and it is communicated by an author who has a high level of credibility in terms of the scientific knowledge he employs in his books.

The issue of the Māori gene has gone global; what started as a small scientific research project has permeated news media, the internet and the world of popular and scientific fiction. The obvious likelihood of Crichton's book "Next" being made into a movie, like his other successful books, is very high. This means there is a real possibility that the movie going world could also be exposed to this idea, that Māori have a warrior gene that is potentially resolvable through genetic treatment.

There is of course, always the opportunity for a new discourse to emerge in terms of how New Zealand society might like to establish its future societal order and with this positive thought in mind a caption from The Press caught my eye: "Warrior gene: it may be the result of too close an association with aggressive Caucasians" (Van Benyen, 2006, p. 14).

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