

Facing notions that misrepresent Māori

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Abstract: In the target article of this issue, Professor Hook (2009) comprehensively reviews the “warrior gene” debate. The hypothesis that Māori are genetically predisposed to risk-taking, violence and criminal behaviour has sparked controversy and debate amongst Māori and scientist alike. Hook demonstrates that the view is unsupported by the scientific evidence to date. The present commentary raises the question of how Māori are to deal with ideas that are ultimately un-evidenced yet are presented as being representative of Māori, potentially leading to harmful misconceptions.

Keywords: genetics; Māori; racial stereotypes; warrior

In this issue of MAI Review, Hook (2009) presents a very thought provoking paper on the monoamine oxidase (MAO) genes in relation to a study on a small group of Māori published by Lea and Chambers (2007). A particular form of the gene known as monoamine oxidase A has been previously dubbed the “warrior gene” due to its association with aggressive behaviour (Gibbons, 2004). Lea and Chambers indicated that this version of the gene was particularly frequent in Māori thus predisposing Māori to violent, so-called “warrior-like” behaviour that had been evolutionarily conserved because it aided survival. In his article, Hook outlines the debate and demonstrates how statements made by Lea and Chambers over-reached their data in several respects. Hook also took exception to the notion that Māori violence is inherently due to genetics. The most convincing argument made by Hook follows a review of a long list of behavioural disorders that appear to be affected by MAOs. Hook contends that these violent and anti-social disorders are not advantageous at all and that this information implies that Māori are, as a race, mentally defective. Ultimately, Hook demonstrates that the belief that Māori are genetically predisposed to violence is not adequately supported by the findings of the Lea and Chambers data.

Hook indicates that ascribing violent behaviour to be an inherently genetic aspect of a race is fertile ground for perpetuating negative racial stereotypes. In fairness, it is clear that researchers of the “warrior gene hypothesis” did not intend to suggest an absolute cause-and-effect relationship between the MAO-A haplotype and behaviour which would see 56% of Māori, 59% of Africans, 61% of Pacific Islanders and 77% of Chinese exhibiting violent and anti-social behaviour (reviewed in Lea & Chambers, 2007). Nevertheless, it is virtually unavoidable that notions that imply genetically determined violent tendencies fan the flames of racism as they ignore the simple fact that the vast majority of Māori do not exhibit criminal behaviour.

Although it is true that Māori are over-represented in the criminal justice system (Department of Corrections, 2007), to suggest that this is almost an ineluctable result of genetics is overly reductionist and potentially harmful. There is ample evidence to demonstrate that high crime rates as well as poor rates of health are strongly linked to low socio-economic conditions (Kawachi, Kennedy & Wilkinson, 1999), and Māori in New Zealand currently exhibit all three of these situational features (Crampton, Salmond & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Reid, Robson & Jones, 2000). This strongly suggests that social and economic rather than genetic factors are most likely responsible for the unfavourable rates of not only violent crime, but also health.

Facing distorted negative stereotypes

Hook elaborates on how erroneous racially based conclusions can have serious social, ethical and political implications, particularly if incorrect notions become enshrined in public policy or popular belief. He argues that these kinds of genetic hypotheses are fodder for a new kind of eugenics that may seek to tailor-make or screen embryos for favourable genetic qualities. Although plausible, his comments on eugenics lead more towards the extremes and perhaps the more immediate concern, also mentioned by Hook, is the impact that behavioural genetic studies such as these can have on negative stereotyping.

Māori and non-Māori in New Zealand are often faced with a barrage of negative statistics on Māori health, criminality, socio-economics, and now genetics, which help to feed a negative stereotype. The media plays an important role in perpetuating such stereotypes and even though efforts are made to have positive and fair representation in the media, the mainstream media is overwhelming negative towards minority groups (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001; Nairn, Pega, McCreanor, Rankine & Barnes, 2006; Stuart, 2002). It is interesting to note that even Lea and Chambers (2007) claimed that the negative attention garnered by their theory was due to misquotes and misunderstanding in the media. The impact of this collective over-emphasis of negative traits leads to a distorted view of Māori in general and causes us to ask the question of how such distorted stereotypes can be dispelled.

The genesis and perpetuation of prejudice and racial stereotypes is due to a number of factors from social, to organizational, societal and possibly even biological influences (Duckitt, 1992). Simply living in the same geographic area as non-Māori does not guarantee that incorrect stereotypes of Māori will be discredited. There have been a number of studies based on Intergroup Contact Theory that show that prejudice and stereotyping can be reduced through face-to-face contacts between groups if the nature of the contact satisfies a number of key “optimal” conditions. These optimal conditions are: equal group status within the situation; common goals; intergroup cooperation; and the support of authorities, law, or custom (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). Furthermore, the reduction of prejudice is increased when the “minority” group member does not fit the perceived stereotype and the contact occurs often and in a number of social contexts (Rothbart & John, 1985). Since the majority of Māori are not violent, and therefore not stereotypical, an incorrectly held stereotype of Māori may largely be due to a lack of optimal contact with Māori.

As the causes of prejudice are multifactorial, it follows that the elimination of Māori stereotypes also requires a multifactorial approach so that the conditions of optimal contact are provided within educational institutions, government institutions, working environments, social clubs, and even in personal friendships (Duckitt, 1992). Intergroup friendships between individuals of minority and majority groups can have a powerful effect on dispelling perpetuated stereotypes and creating a sense of mutual respect (reviewed in Pettigrew, 1998). However, it may be a rather large undertaking for Māori alone to be the initiators and directors of intergroup initiatives, as Māori in New Zealand are outnumbered 5.7 to 1 (Statistics New Zealand, 2001). Therefore institutional leaders including government and civic leaders must also be committed to establishing policies that maximise optimal conditions for intergroup contact so that notions such as Māori being a genetically violent race will be quickly dispelled against a backdrop of positive real-life interactions with Māori people that represent the Māori majority.

The right to continuous self-determination

New research is coming to light at an unprecedented pace in all areas of knowledge, not just in genetics or science. It should be remembered that any research has the possibility of containing some truth that can ultimately benefit or negatively impact Māori and so must not

be dismissed without scrutiny. Before any theory or information can be of true benefit, the information must first be understood, validated, and then assessed for how the outcomes or findings might apply to Māori. As a right of self-determination, Māori have the right to participate in first the understanding and then the validation and assessment of emergent research, but there must be systems in place to accomplish these three processes effectively. Hook demonstrates that academic discussion is one means of understanding, validation and assessment. Although this approach opens the topic to public debate, the likelihood that Māori other than Māori researchers would access information in this form is low. In order for the aims of self-determination to be effective and ongoing, additional means are required so that discussion occurs at a level that touches all Māori (Durie, 1998). This may require discussion at the iwi and hapū levels with the assistance of those that can interpret specialised information or language that arises from the research, such as academics in the relevant area of expertise.

Conclusion

Studies such as the warrior gene hypothesis may not have intended to draw racial ire but nevertheless the claims of the hypothesis have racist implications and misrepresent Māori as a whole. Hook has shown that the theory of Māori being a violent race is not substantiated by the study and has also described some of the implications of such beliefs on a societal level.

Although the warrior gene hypothesis may be one of the first studies to attempt to connect behaviour with genetics on a racial level, it is not likely to be the last. Therefore, Māori and other indigenous peoples need to have a means of dealing with such information according to their own terms. On the wider scale, the perpetuation of distorted racial stereotypes irrevocably has wider social and political implications. The need to dispel these stereotypes must be a priority for all New Zealanders in order for Māori to be accurately represented, rather than being judged according to a criminal minority that exists within all peoples.

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