

“Warrior genes” A response to peer commentaries

G. Raumati Hook

Abstract: The “Warrior Gene” target article by Hook has been commented on by several peers who raised numerous issues. Most agreed that the assignment of a gene to Māori to account for occasional behavioural problems is not warranted. In addition, they raised other issues such as the effects of politicians and the media as well as the need to address the problem through Māori *tikanga* (custom). It is also proposed here that the “Warrior Gene” problem should be addressed by a body of ethicists such as that of the Bioethics Council a body established by the previous Labour Government to promote intercultural understanding on issues involving modern medicine, health and custom. Racial profiling is also discussed and its dangers to Māori noted.

Keywords: bioethics; commentaries; monoamine oxidases; racial profiling; warrior genes

The “warrior gene” hypothesis

The purpose of this paper is to respond to the invited peer commentaries that accompanied the target article entitled “The Warrior Gene hypothesis and the disease of being Māori” (Hook, 2009). The editor of MAI Review has encouraged the debate of issues pertinent to Māori and designated space in this journal for that purpose. The opportunity to make a further comment is appreciated.

The intent of the target paper on the “warrior gene” hypothesis (Hook, 2009) was to examine the idea that many Māori carry a monoamine oxidase gene that contributes to criminality and other high-risk behaviour exhibited by some Māori (Lea & Chambers, 2007). The idea that the behaviour could be influenced by a specific monoamine oxidase gene commonly known as the “warrior gene” (Gibbons, 2004), when originally proposed caused considerable furore with protests from Māori leaders as well as scientists (Crampton & Parkin, 2007; “Maoris attack,” 2006; Merriman & Cameron, 2007; “Poverty behind violence,” 2006; “Warrior gene,” 2006); however, the notion of a “warrior gene” has serious implications for Māori which lie outside of the science and outside of the immediate consequences of ethnic derogation.

If Māori are genetically disposed towards high risk behaviour then there are several repercussions that could arise from that condition, the most important of which is its use by Pākehā to stereotype the condition of being Māori, into the category of mental defect. Consequently, children, for example, could be “diagnosed” as being Māori and therefore subjected to drug therapies as a means of preventing the development of behavioural disorders. Unlikely perhaps but worse things have happened to Māori in the past. The suggestion by Hook (2009) that being Māori could take on the mantle of being a disease was only semi-serious; however, common knowledge or acceptance of the idea could lead to its use in racial profiling. Most Māori are not violent nor do they engage in risky behaviour (Martin, 2009); and those that do are exceptional. The hypothesis regarding the “warrior gene” is unproven and the implications regarding it are, at this time, all speculative.

The target article was designed to stimulate thought, discussion, and to encourage Māori to take a position or develop an attitude towards scientific ideas that attempt to define or

influence their perceptions of who they are. The paper was not about Māori warriors and nor was it specifically about Māori violence.

The commentaries

Responses to the paper by Hook (2009) on the “Warrior Gene” hypothesis have been gratifying, although quite clearly perceptions of the paper varied markedly from commentator to commentator. However, all offered their personal insight with each commentary providing value to a topic that few had considered deeply. Those who offered conjectural ideas and new insights were of particular value in advancing an understanding of the implications of the “warrior gene” hypothesis.

Chant (2009) in her commentary, pointed out that the media and science were of particular significance as sources of information for the general public, but neither of these sources have served Māori well. Chant was particularly astute in identifying references to the “warrior gene” in Michael Crichton’s book, “Next” an indication that public acceptance of the idea may be well underway.

In the course of colonial history New Zealand’s political leadership have encouraged negative images of Māori (Chant, 2009) and, in fact, have actively worked against Māori insofar as public perceptions are concerned (Bull, 2004). Introduction of the “warrior gene” concept into the modern anti-Māori rhetoric will lead to further denigration of Māori. Public perceptions of Māori as underdeveloped, un-civilized, and a threat to the “established order of society” (Chant, 2009, p. 1) have been throughout colonial history in New Zealand, and continue even today. The perception that Māori are more inclined to ‘madness’ than Pākehā, for example, (Chant, 2009) appears not uncommon amongst professional psychiatrists, but is it true? Chant understood completely the implications and dangers to Māori public image as well as self-image. Māori have to contend with many negative statistics including those on Māori health, criminality, socio-economics, and now genetics, which help to reinforce a negative stereotype (Martin, 2009).

As pointed out by Cram (2009) negative images of Māori were used by successive Colonial governments to marginalize Māori as part of the process to separate Māori from their resources such as land, fisheries, forests, lakes and rivers. Even today such negative images may be used to disadvantage and marginalize Māori. Today, especially in the United States, youth perceived as having behavioural problems are diagnosed with mental disorders and medicated accordingly. Dr Cram also asked the question as to what the original participants in the study thought and as a novel idea should perhaps be examined more closely.

Ferguson (2009) moved the debate into a traditional Māori perspective looking at the issues from the points of view of *tikanga* (custom). This was an interesting idea that should have been fundamental to the debate that suggested a place for traditional values in dealing with the dangers of the modern world. Her approach deserves close consideration and I would encourage further development along such lines.

The ethics and responsibilities of scientists are an issue (Harris, 2009; Hudson, 2009) which also needs attention. Collings (2009) examined the science of the supposition and agreed that the idea was based on insufficient evidence. Perhaps the debate should be handed over to the Bioethics Council for their ideas and guidance, unfortunately, the Council was disestablished in March of 2009 by the current National Government (Smith, 2009). The need for a culturally diverse body of ethicists working at national level has never been greater. The work of the Council was respected internationally providing guidance and good sense to issues that had serious repercussions for both mainstream and Māori.

Martin (2009) was absolutely correct in pointing out that not all Māori are violent even if they feature prominently in today's court agenda. Martin (2009) also suggested a process that might be used to counter negative stereotypes involving inter-group contact and to a large degree this may be the only way to bring the Māori and Pākehā closer together. Ormond (2009) raised some issues regarding positive images for Māori and the use of the 'Ka mate' haka as she calls it "to re-enact ancient Māori warrior preparation for warfare" (p. 2). In pointing this out, Ormond should perhaps have reminded the uninitiated that the 'Ka mate' haka composed by Te Rauparaha, was, in fact, a celebration of life not war.

Racial stereotypes and racial profiling

In the paper by Hook (2009) a number of serious implications were examined including the identification of the gene as a possible genomic defect thus leading to its elimination from the gene pool through the technique of preimplantation genetic diagnosis ("Preimplantation genetic diagnosis," 2008, 2009). While those implications are indeed serious they are in fact quite remote in a country like New Zealand. Closer to home is the use of the "warrior gene" in the process of racial profiling or racial stereotyping. Racial profiling is probably the most immediate in terms of dangers to ethnic people.

According to Wikipedia:

Racial profiling is the inclusion of racial or ethnic characteristics in determining whether a person is considered likely to commit a particular type of crime or an illegal act or to behave in a "predictable" manner. ("Racial profiling," 2009).

The "warrior gene" hypothesis could be used by the police as a means of identifying would-be felons. The idea that Māori equates to high risk behaviours is to invite racial profiling of the worst kind. It is also possible that such profiling already exists insofar as police attitudes being influenced according to the racial identity of the person(s) they are dealing with.

Racial profiling is an extremely dangerous practice having been identified as one of the factors that has led to the death of innocent parties including police officers (see for example, Baker & Eligon, 2009). Racial profiling is used all over the world and extensively in the United States by mainstream law-enforcement officers to arrest and detain citizens whom they suspect might be engaged in illegal activities. In the United States most of the detainees are black or Hispanic who are forced to endure the stresses and risks of being viewed as potential felons by the police.

The most recent incident involving Henry Louis Gates Jr., an internationally recognized black Harvard scholar, had overtones of racial profiling ("The Gates case," 2009). Almost unbelievably, even high ranking government officials such as Colin Powell have been subject to racial profiling (Hechtkopf, 2009). The recent detaining of Shahrukh Khan, an internationally known Bollywood movie star, at the Newark Airport was based upon the racial profiling of Indian Muslims (Wheaton, 2009). The idea of profiling has even crept into the approach of service organizations such as the United States Forest Service who recently issued a warning, "To beware of campers in national forests who eat tortillas, drink Tecate beer and play Spanish music because they could be armed marijuana growers" (The Associated Press, 2009). Will we see a similar warning in New Zealand regarding brown people, guitars and tattoos? While laughable, the idea speaks to the depths to which racial stereotyping has reached.

Could this kind of profiling ever reach this level in New Zealand? Certainly the recent incursion into Tuhoe country by the armed offenders squad (Rowan, 2007) on October 15, 2007 on the pretext of looking for weapons supposedly held by Māori was initiated by the

Terrorist Suppression Act (2002). The role profiling might have played in this is not clear (Rowen, 2007). It is clear however, that no major Pākehā community has received quite the same treatment.

Racial profiling is definitely part of today's world, but it would be tragic if the "Warrior Gene" became part of the Māori profile. Because as Elmira Mazombe, an African American and executive for racial justice of the United Methodist Women's Division has said:

Racial profiling occurs in society when people in power create myths about another race or culture, then use their power to act on them. For many people of color, the anxiety of not knowing when this will occur creates daily fear. (Martini, 2009, para. 5).

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Author Notes

The author acknowledges the assistance of L. Parehaereone Raumati in researching and debating the content of this manuscript. This research was funded by the Institute for Māori Research and Development, Whangaparaoa, New Zealand. G. Raumati Hook (Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāti Toa, Te Atiawa) is an Adjunct Professor at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and Director of the Institute for Māori Research and Development

E-mail: hook@raumatiassociates.com;

Web: <http://www.raumatiassociates.com>