

## Once were warriors, or warriors still?

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**Abstract:** The idea that Māori were a ‘warrior society’ is clearly outlined in the target article by Gary Raumati Hook (2009). Hook takes the reader on a journey of scientific exploration and findings of previous studies to discuss the notion that Māori carry a gene that may or may not be responsible for some of Māori behaviour. Throughout the article Hook suggests that the label, ‘warrior gene’ is not appropriate and that environmental factors have not been considered. The nature versus nurture debate is apparent and the author constantly questions the validity of the warrior gene hypothesis or more importantly the association of the monoamine oxidase gene or *MAO* to Māori antisocial behaviour. This commentary highlights and discusses three points from Hook’s paper. First is the inappropriate labelling or stereotyping of Māori. Second is the effect stereotyping can have on future generations of Māori. The third point is how key cultural concepts and principles such as *whakapapa* (genealogy), *āhua* (behaviour), *mauri* (life force), *mana* (pride) and *tapu* (sacredness) constantly underpin the subject of Hook’s article.

**Keywords:** ethnicity; genetics; Māori; violence

The ‘MAO gene’ more commonly referred to as the ‘warrior gene’, was named by Ann Gibbons a scientific journalist in 2004, at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists in Tampa, Florida (Gibbons, 2004). The term, ‘warrior gene’ has encouraged academics like Hook (2009) to question the notion that we, as Māori and our behaviours are a direct result of our tipuna (ancestors) and their ordeals migrating to Aotearoa New Zealand and the hardships they experienced in war times (Hook, 2009). When I read the title and abstract of Hook’s paper, I immediately had visions of the 1994 movie titled “Once were warriors” particularly the scenes of violence endured by Māori women at the hands of Māori men. This movie was very influential in the labelling of Māori as violent individuals, who indulged in alcohol and wife-bashing on a weekly basis.

The children in the movie were portrayed as uneducated truants. Internationally we have had to work hard to dispel the myths that arose from this movie, mainly to prove to the world that not all Māori are like those portrayed in the movie. In fact, many Māori today are excelling in various careers, teaching, law, medicine, accountancy among other careers. The number of Māori academics pursuing higher qualifications has significantly risen since the movie’s first impact in 1994. There are currently well over 200 Māori doctoral students in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga Annual Report, 2008). When the movie ‘Once were warriors’ was first shown, there were only 77 Māori doctoral students (McKinley, Grant, Middleton, Irwin & Williams, 2009). In the 15 years that have passed we have seen the number of Māori doctoral students increase significantly as has the number of doctoral graduates. It is also interesting to note that the ‘warrior gene’ hypothesis revealed itself one year after the movie was publicly screened. On the other hand, as a survivor of spousal abuse I empathise with the many Māori and non-Māori women who have been the recipient of violent, aggressive behaviour from Māori men. However, my initial upbringing was filled with love and warmth so it is not to say that we are ‘born’ into violence rather our paths in life can sometimes lead to violent situations.

The target article by Hook (2009) suggests that Māori experienced more hardship, aggression and violence than most. An assumption is made here that ‘most’ pertains to the ‘Polynesian people’ and not to the wider world population. Lea and Chambers (2007) cited in Hook (2009), agree and suggest that because of the population growth in Aotearoa New Zealand by Māori the ‘MAO gene’ increased. Therefore a further assumption would see this gene within the Polynesian area before Māori

populated Aotearoa New Zealand. This previous evidence gives the impression that like the Polynesian rat, the gene 'came' with Māori and multiplied with the population growth.

### **Whakapapa, mana, mauri, tapu, and āhua**

In the Māori world view, it is widely held that a person's, behaviour, good or bad, is a direct result of one's whakapapa. While some of our mythological accounts of ancestors who were endowed with special powers and skilled in warfare can seem far-fetched, Māori believe the traits and behaviours we display today can be traced back to these ancestors through 'whakapapa'. The principles of whakapapa, mauri, mana, tapu and āhua constantly underpin the underlying assumptions made in the target article. For example, when Hook (2009, p. 3) states that "MAO activity is associated with characteristics related to hypomanic behaviour and sensation seeking" we can note that in the Māori world this is not new information. In Māori mythology, Māui the mythological ancestor displayed these traits and behaviours. Genetic modification or any other subject relating to genetics, is disturbing to many Māori because modifying our genes runs the risk of seriously interfering with the course of whakapapa, thereby seriously compromising our existence as a culture. In addition, the 'tapu' of the person is put at risk as the tinana or body is considered sacred; not to mention the potential effects on the essence or life force which we call 'mauri'. Historically, and with these principles forever in the minds of many Māori, protests around genetic modification or engineering have eventuated. Allowing the modification of the 'ira' or gene would result in the unbalancing of the holistic world of the Māori (Royal Commission on Genetic Modification, 2009).

On the issue of racial stereotyping, Hook urges Māori to take the matter seriously. He follows this admonition by discussing how Māori are over-represented in the domestic violence statistics in Aotearoa New Zealand with no current evidence to substantiate that the MAO gene is responsible for the aggressive behaviour in Māori men. It is also clear that racial stereotyping forms the basis of prejudice and results in the negative judgement of individuals and often the exclusion of children in educational organisations from programmes that could be beneficial to their educational achievement. If Māori children were to be stereotyped as violent individuals they might not be afforded the same opportunities as non-Māori children. Early international studies about racial stereotyping reveal that ethnic minorities attitudes toward other ethnic minorities is also obvious (Holmes, Murachver & Bayard, 2001). In Aotearoa New Zealand, since the 1950s the typical Māori stereotype has been the following, "trouble-makers, lazy, unintelligent, dirty, aggressive, easygoing and friendly" (see Holmes, Murachver & Bayard, 2001, p.1). The media can also perpetuate racial stereotyping therefore Hook's (2009) concern is justified and echoed here.

In conclusion, Hook's target article is an important contribution to our understanding of the 'warrior gene' concept and its ramifications. The present commentary has chosen to highlight perspectives arising from a set of key cultural principles and to suggest how the genetic aspects of the debate interact with them. It also engages with the issue of how racial stereotyping can be detrimental to a culture and why Māori need to be concerned with this research and how it is read in the public forum.

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