

## Māori & violence: What's the problem?

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**Abstract:** In his target article, Professor Raumati Hook (2009) has harnessed the power of science and politics to ask questions about the 'discovery' of the 'warrior gene' in a small number of Māori. Hook however, begins his paper with the seemingly casual dismissal of explanations for the high rate of Māori acts of violence. The present commentary begins with a look into genetic science and then returns to explanations, asking 'what's the problem?' when it comes to Māori and violence.

**Keywords:** domestic violence; ethics; ethnicity; genetics; scientific responsibility

### Introduction

*Ngā hiahia kia titiro ki te tīmata, a, ka kite ai tātou te mutunga* (you must understand the beginning if you wish to see the end). Just over ten years ago an editorial in the *Boston Globe* (1998) argued that genetic testing was more a matter of biology than of politics. This argument then echoed across Aotearoa (New Zealand) as scientists insisted that in order for the public to be able to debate issues of genetic modification in a rational way, we first had to be educated about the science involved. Against this tide of scientific essentialism Linda Smith (1999) spoke of genetic modification as being a powerful mix of cultural arrogance, science, and political power, that strengthens the oppression and colonisation of indigenous peoples.

Throughout our history, research has been one of the tools that colonisers have used to mark Māori as different; different from an exclusive and elusive norm that is the mythology of the colonising population. This marginalisation has, in turn, made our deaths, the theft of our lands, our imprisonment, and the suppression of our languages and cultures, somehow justifiable. We therefore recognise the nature of the debates about genetic science as we have seen these before, in other guises.

It is not that Māori are generally opposed to science. There are whānau (family) who have been helped by genetic scientists to understand diseases that impact harshly across several generations. There are also Māori genetic scientists at the forefront of their fields. So it would seem that genetic science has a part to play, in the right hands and for the right purpose. When ethical and moral abuses happen then it is often difficult for indigenous peoples to withdraw their consent to research, even if they have been asked in the first place (Shelton, nd). The debates about the rights and wrongs of Lea and Chambers' (2007) research need to make space for the voices of those who consented to participate in this research. These people need to be supported now should they decide to withdraw from or re-commit to this research.

Concerns about the uses and abuses of indigenous genetic material led to the 1995 Declaration of Indigenous Peoples of the Western Hemisphere Regarding the Human Genome Diversity Project. This Declaration (1995) demonstrated the understanding the signatories had about the complexity of the issues challenging indigenous peoples by stating that:

We demand that scientific endeavors and resources be prioritized to support and improve social, economic, and environmental conditions of Indigenous peoples in the environments, thereby improving health conditions and raising the overall quality of life.

An over-emphasis on genetic testing and genetic determinism can be at the exclusion of other determinants of health and well-being. This can, in turn, lead to a 'blame the victim' mindset. As the Council for Responsible Genetics (1997, in Willis, 2002, p. 147) decries:

The overemphasis on genetic factors in cancer, when environmental carcinogens are known to make major contributions, takes attention away from environmental cleanup measures that could, in fact, reduce the incidence of cancer. Current research has identified links between cancer and a host of non-genetic factors, including organochlorides, estrogen and estrogen-like chemicals, pesticides, radiation, bovine growth hormone, diet and exercise.

In much the same way, we need to ask what the multiple determinants of violence are. A population / ecological model of family violence, for example, builds a multi-level picture of risk factors for family violence that begins to address family violence within a broader societal context. The causes of Māori family violence are acknowledged as a complex mix of historical and contemporary factors. For example, we have the loss of land and the subsequent moves made by whānau away from traditional areas in order to find work; and the pressures of poor and overcrowded housing.

The Mauri Ora framework (Kruger et al., 2004) furthers our understanding of whānau violence. Whānau violence is seen as a learned behaviour that has become normalised because it can be rationalised by 'imposter tikanga'. The framework endorses the objective of zero tolerance to whānau violence, acknowledging that achieving this will take time.

The complexity of the explanations demands complexity from the solutions if Māori family violence is to be successfully addressed. Three fundamental tasks are identified by the Mauri Ora framework as underpinning a conceptual framework for achieving whānau wellbeing (Kruger et al., 2004):

- dispelling the illusion (at the collective and individual level) that whānau violence is normal and acceptable;
- removing opportunities for whānau violence to be perpetuated through education for empowerment and liberation of whānau, hapū and iwi;
- and teaching transformative practices based on Māori cultural imperatives that provide alternatives to violence (p. 5).

In summary, the growing recognition of the need for a structural analysis of family violence has occurred alongside the endorsement of holistic Māori models of prevention and intervention. Thank goodness we are capable of an analysis that expands our understandings of family violence beyond the speculation that it is in our nature. The politics of genetic research remain, however, because the solutions to it are about Māori empowerment and the right of Māori to be Māori – something we have always been fighting for. This urge for tino rangatiratanga may well be in our DNA and, as Hook (2009) warns us, it seems that this is the gene that the new eugenics is mostly targeted at.

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## Author Notes

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