

## "My Genes Made Me Do It"

[youtube:<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0cbABjilZQ> auto]

The Nuffield Council of Bioethics is asking all of us what to do if scientists find genes for homosexuality, shyness, intelligence, addiction, violence or any other behavior tendency. The public consultation on genes and human behavior will run until July.

The reason for urgency is that scientists are locked in a disturbing race, not just to match genes with disease, but also genes with every aspect of behavior. There are huge legal implications - what if we find a gene for criminality? Some say we already have. Some criminals on death row in America are already pleading bad genes as a defence against murder.

The entire population of Iceland is being tested for their genes, matched against medical records. If extended, the study could reveal darker secrets - perhaps gene patterns in those who rape or steal, or the exceptionally musical, intelligent, athletic, hot-tempered or extrovert.

Many social scientists claim it's nonsense to link genes with behavior - that we are more than bags of biodata, formed mainly by early experience. However we now know from studies of adopted children, twins separated from birth, and recent gene testing that much of what we become really is in our genes.

The lesson of history is that whatever can be done will be done, somewhere, sometime by someone. By 2010 expect parents in some countries to start testing embryos for "good personalities" before implanting them, or foetuses with a view to destroying all but the most promising. By 2015 expect some companies to start pre-job gene screening for personality and other traits unless blocked by law.

We already know certain genes can be associated with sensation-seeking, high-risk behaviors and are often found in those addicted to alcohol, heroin or gambling. Recently we learned that these so-called addictive genes may be more common in the Chinese. Is this going to feed racial hatred or genetic discrimination? Should they have genetic screening and if necessary be warned of the dangers of alcohol?

Should people with "bad" genes be excluded from working in pubs? Could someone sue for alcoholism if their boss knowingly puts them behind a bar?

And what about genes linked to extreme antisocial behavior? Whose fault is it when a child stabs another child to death? What if we find that 25% of those with certain genes land up in prison for violence before they are twenty five years old?

Some years ago there was a suggestion - later disputed - that scientists had found a "gay" gene that made homosexual orientation more likely. Many gay men and women were horrified at the thought that the discovery - true or imagined - could lead to selective abortion on a massive scale.

Many scientists dismiss such fears as science fiction because "we will never discover a simple gene for things as complex as intelligence, personality or sexuality". They also tell us that in any case, who on earth would want to use such a discovery?

The same scientists have spouted similar rubbish at every step along the genetic revolution. They told us it would be almost impossible to clone mammals, then that it would be extremely unlikely to be able to clone a human embryo. (Absurd nonsense - if so, then why on earth was Parliament asked to approve creation of cloned embryos for research last month?).

Then they said that no one would want to clone a baby. Wrong again. Many of the millions of hits on my website each year come from sad people wanting human cloning for themselves, partners or dead children. The results will be grotesque monsters with severe malformations, and emotional disaster for children lucky enough to be born healthy.

Gene specialists are the opposite of computer geeks. Bill Gates is forever hyping the future. When he says it's here we all know we'll have to wait. But geneticists tend to do the opposite. When the work is all but complete, many of them will tell you it's almost impossible.

We saw this in news of Dolly the cloned sheep - seven months old before we were told. The work was well progressed a year before she was born, and not a whisper.

We saw it also in Jose Cibelli's work at Advanced Cell Technology, combining one of his cells with an egg. The cloned embryo began to divide, and he killed it. The egg was from a cow. He did his own work in absolute secrecy - too scared to tell for over three years. Now we hear Australians have also cloned an embryo using human genes and a pig's egg - work started over two years ago.

Whatever you read in [genetics](#) is usually at least one to two years behind the real work. Many in the field are worried that your "over-reaction" will close their "life-saving" laboratories down.

So the real question you need to ask is not what headlines you will hear about next week, but what headlines will there be in 2003 describing work done in 2001? The first selection tests for intelligence or personality will undoubtedly be secret. A likely target will be IVF programmes in other countries. The biggest adoption programme in history is underway to find wombs for 100,000 frozen surplus IVF embryos in America. Imagine how keen some parents might be to make sure they get the best embryos.

We've already seen the stampede for human cloning by a small minority who want pedigree children. Gene testing in the womb is a brutally simpler way to create designer babies - just destroy the imperfect.

So what should we do? We urgently need global agreement to ban all gene testing and selection for "normal" characteristics, whether sex, intelligence, physique, personality type or whatever else is being sold. We are seeing a similar consensus on the birth of human clones.

It should be a criminal offence to discriminate on the basis of genetic code with the sole exception of genes for serious physical disease, where the test is requested by the individual for prevention, treatment or insurance.

When half the world has only £2 a year to spend per person on health care we have far better things to do than chase behavior genes. Spend gene money on a miracle cure for cancer, or a

vaccine for malaria, or adult stem cells to treat diabetes. It's hardly a surprise that geneticists try so hard to keep their work secret. Much of it is brilliant, but some of it is frankly obscene.

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