

Genes given too tight a fit

LIKE Jan Kevlin (November 26), many behavioural scientists are worried about the recent upsurge of naive genetic determinism and reductionist biological explanations for human behaviour. The discovery of the gay gene, or the aggression gene (which received an equal amount of press coverage a couple of months ago), illustrates the success of contemporary molecular genetics in finding genes affecting almost every aspect of human psychology.

More often than not, however, findings of different research groups are conflicting, and detailed analysis reveals the limited effect genes really have on human behaviour. One leading scientist recently declared that research into heritability is actually the best demonstration of the importance of the environment.

More than 40 years ago, psychologists started to produce an enormous body of scientific work demonstrating the plasticity and environmental malleability of human behaviour, providing us with a powerful antidote to the then ruling genetic determinism views. For a while it seemed they were on their way out, but now, due to the tremendous popularity of molecular genetics and gene technology, they are back with new vigour and vitality.

Scientists need to inform the public about the real, limited and non-determining influence of genes.

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