

Not at all in the genes

Craig Newnes interviews Jay Joseph

Some things bear repeating: science is a mixture of good and ill, much in psychology is a story told entirely in metaphor, and, just because various things run in families, genetics may have nothing to do with it. This last point has been addressed by Kamin, Laing, Marshall and others, all swimming against the tide of bio-determinism so little questioned in our times. In *The Gene Illusion* Dr Jay Joseph, a clinical psychologist from California argues that all the research to date into the genetics of schizophrenia, intelligence and criminal behaviour is so flawed that the results are meaningless. Joseph suggests that in their determination to find genetic causes for behaviour researchers have ignored basic research rules governing controlled studies and other factors. With a blend of irrefutable logic and systematic science *The Gene Illusion* debunks all the myths of the bio-genetic industry. The book explores the eugenic foundations of genetic research in psychology and psychiatry and systematically critiques every major attempt to prove that we are little more than our genes. For some researchers, psychologists and psychiatrists, it could change their view of genetic research forever.

In the end, Joseph shows that far from demonstrating that schizophrenia, intelligence and criminal conduct are genetically determined, research to date actually supports nurture (or, more accurately, lack of it) over nature. Craig Newnes thought it might be a good time to find out what all the fuss is about.

Who the devil are you?

I'm a clinical psychologist practicing in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. I made a career change in my 30s, and received a doctoral degree in clinical psychology in 2000 from the California School of Professional Psychology, Alameda, California. My dissertation consisted of a critical analysis of the evidence supporting a genetic basis for schizophrenia, which consists mainly of twin and adoption studies. Since then, I have published several articles on the genetics of schizophrenia and other psychiatric diagnoses. *The Gene Illusion* combines much of the work and thinking I had done in the previous six years, plus research into new areas (for me), such as IQ and molecular genetics. Currently, I take the minority position challenging the current widespread belief, recounted in untold textbooks and journal articles, that psychiatric disorders and normal psychological trait variations have important hereditary influences.

How did the passionate interest in genetics develop?

I came into the field of psychology believing that 1) many psychiatric diagnoses can be seen more as labelling and pathologizing deviant behaviour than as real diseases, and 2) to the extent that people suffer psychological distress and damage, the likely causes are abusive and neglectful family environments, social and political factors, and the pressures of living in advanced industrial societies. I discovered that most psychiatric conditions

were viewed by psychiatry as "biological" and "genetic." This motivated me to go to the primary sources of genetic theories— family, twin, and adoption studies— as well as to the works of critics. I found that twin and adoption studies contained massive methodological problems, and more importantly, that their authors' conclusions in favour of genetics rested on very questionable theoretical assumptions. In the case of twin studies, it is assumed that there are no differences in the social and physical environments experienced by identical versus fraternal twins, which seemed to me obviously untrue. Naturally, the deeper I dug the more motivated I was to dig even further. I also found out that the early genetic studies were performed by people strongly devoted to the genetic position, who performed their studies in order to bolster the case for human selective breeding programmes - eugenics.

The Gene Illusion is extraordinarily detailed in its critique of schizophrenia twin studies. The psy-complex has a habit of acting as if serious criticism of this kind simply doesn't matter. How have the psychological and psychiatric community responded?

They have responded, as is their habit, mostly by ignoring my work (although several mainstream journals have published my articles and have been quite fair with me). An exception has been my work on the genetics of ADHD, where my publications on this topic have been followed by responses from American psychiatric geneticists Steven Faraone and Joseph Biederman. They argued that my work contained errors of scientific logic and ignored the results of ADHD segregation analyses and molecular genetics research. They claimed that genetic theory makes predictions that turn out to be true. While acknowledging that some of my criticisms have merit, they concluded that genetic explanations are more "parsimonious," and should be accepted because they "have not been disproved." But the burden of proof falls on them, not the critics.

I have always taken the position that I don't need a systematic critique of the research data on schizophrenia because the idea of mental illness is fundamentally flawed. People like Thomas Szasz and Mary Boyle have pretty much trashed the whole concept as far as I'm concerned. Am I just being lazy?

I agree that the schizophrenia concept is fundamentally flawed. But this is still the minority view, so it's necessary to demonstrate that, even if schizophrenia were a valid entity, there's little if any scientifically acceptable evidence that it is caused by genetic factors. After nearly two decades of looking, no schizophrenia genes have been found. The reason is that they don't exist.

In my experience psychiatrists are very pragmatic and a lot of the work is done by junior doctors who don't have much time to read, especially big books. Is it psychiatrists or psychologists you are trying to influence?

I am trying to influence psychologists, psychiatrists, and others in related fields. I suspect that I will receive more of a hearing from younger professionals and academics. They may be more open to new ideas. I tried to write the book in a way that could be understood by the general public as well; this was often difficult.

What would you hope psychologists would do differently having understood the weakness of the pro-gene lobby's arguments and research.

I would hope that they would go back and read the original studies with a more critical eye. If this isn't possible, they should view the arguments of critics as being on at least equal footing with mainstream arguments in support of genetics. Clinicians should become more sceptical of both genetic and biological theories, which are the foundation of biological psychiatry's now mainstream position that mental disorders are "brain diseases." It might also lead them to become more sceptical of the emphasis on pharmacological interventions. I believe that many clinicians are already unconvinced by biological theories, based in part on clinical experience showing that most people carrying more disabling diagnoses experienced chaotic and abusive family and social environments. We learn about this because we talk to people in distress and empathically listen to their stories, whereas in genetic research people are seen mainly as diagnosed subjects. In my book I quoted the American psychologist and psychiatric genetic researcher David Rosenthal, who in 1968 observed that supporters of environmental causes of schizophrenia tend to be interested in *people*, whereas genetic researchers focus on *numbers*. These words are more true today than in Rosenthal's time. At bottom, I hope that the rejection of genetic theories will help us understand more clearly that the people we work with are not damaged biologically or hereditarily, but emotionally.

Having discovered people are "damaged emotionally" what would psychologists do?

It is essential that we help people change their environments. Even more important, however, is that therapists must themselves do something to change the social and political environments that inflict the psychological damage we see in the people we work with. It is not enough to undo this damage on the individual level; change must be made at the political level as well. Otherwise, psychotherapists may be unwittingly helping people adapt to oppressive conditions, when the goal should be to eliminate oppression.

As well as schizophrenia, The Gene Illusion covers intelligence and criminality. You're very critical of research in both fields. If most of what has been done in the world of intelligence research is based on flawed methodology, do you think IQ testing should be abandoned?

In Chapter 9 of *The Gene Illusion* I wrote that IQ tests should indeed be abandoned. I realize that many psychologists who might agree with this position also feel that the tests have some positive features apart from the alleged measurement of "intelligence." However, any possible useful aspects of IQ tests could be incorporated into new tests, or could be obtained from existing tests. The main thing would be to abandon any test claiming to be able to measure and quantify "intelligence." I am partial to Ken Richardson's position, in his 2000 book *The Making of Intelligence*, that IQ tests were promoted by the economic elite to reproduce the existing ranks in society, but were claimed to be measuring something else ("intelligence"). IQ tests are, by their very nature, biased against minority groups and the working class.

The research on the genetics of criminality is equally weak. What's going on here? Why are people funding research that is doomed to fail rather than looking into more obvious causes of criminality - poverty, greed, the need to destroy?

Because this type of research is promoted by the wealthy elite, who seek to distract attention from the social conditions causing crime *that they created*. The goal of biological and genetic research on crime is to place blame on people's biology, not their social conditions. Genetic research on criminality has a long and ugly history. Criminal offenders were labelled by eugenicists, racial hygienists and Nazis as the biological remnants of our "savage" past in need of sterilization, castration, or worse. The racist implications of these theories are obvious.

Do we have a responsibility to let the public know the implications of your work?

Yes, because the public's views are shaped by the views of mainstream psychiatry and psychology. These views are typically delivered to the public by journalists, in articles and in popular books. I'm really pleased that in the UK at least my work is being quoted in the press. Psychologists need to be much more open to critical reflection and be more outspoken about what creates madness, limits creativity, and pushes people into criminality. Genetics is a one way street leading to a blind alley in all these areas.

The Gene Illusion: Genetic research in psychiatry and psychology under the microscope. (ISBN 1 898059 47 7)

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