

The ills of society can influence 'killing gene'

David Buss, author of "The Murderer Next Door: Why the Mind is Designed to Kill" (The News, May 26), tells us that all humans have genes for killing. Unless all killings are purely accidental, it has to be true. But how much do we learn from this approach?

Since very few of us ever get around to killing anyone, we apparently also have genes for not killing. The real point is that all human actions are necessarily a result of both genes and environment. Genes can be turned on and off, but they vary (mutate) only quite rarely. The environments of our genes, however – both internal and external to us as organisms – vary tremendously.

Natural selection saves genes that enable organisms to make their behavior adaptive in the different environments in which they are likely to find themselves. The question, then, is the one Buss wanted to put aside: With respect to universal genes, like Buss's murder genes, only different environments can cause some people to become murderers and others not. Different social environments can lead to the belief that violence or killing can be adaptive, or that it cannot; that murder is a proper punishment for anyone who crosses us, or that it is not. Different learning environments, especially acting on young people, can either enhance or reduce the ability to make appropriate decisions.

If that is why some individuals murder and others do not, then Buss is surely wrong to label those inclined to blame killings on "ills" of society – such as inadequacies of child rearing, gross injustices, and breakdowns in negotiations leading to war – as "the ones who tread on dangerous moral ground."

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