

DNA made me do it

Modern-day genetics can erode moral responsibility



STEPHANIE DUBE

A college student goes home for the weekend, and his mother welcomes him with a freshly baked pumpkin pie. She slices a large piece for her son, topping it with the warm pie and a whopping dose of cold whipped cream. The son has a choice. He can dig in or politely decline. If he has been living off Ramen noodles for the past two months, he would be a fool to refuse the offer. But what if his mother just told him a few days earlier that she needs to lose weight? If he ignores the warning and eats the pie, who is to blame?

A group of researchers has said that choosing to eat the pie is not a decision based on willpower but simply the result of an interaction of brain chemicals, behavioral conditioning and heredity. Unfortunately, blaming personal choices on genetics and biology closes the door on taking personal responsibility for actions.

Dr. James C. Rosen, a professor of psychology at the University of Vermont, said in a *New York Times* article that the freedom to choose is little more than a useful fiction.

There is no magical stuff inside of you that willpower that should somehow override nature," he said.

In the last few years, scientists have pinpointed genes which may influence certain behaviors, including criminality, infidelity, alcoholism and homosexuality.

Rosen's statement is true, it would be unfair to expect people to somehow

override their genetic makeup. If a person is genetically prone to being homosexual, he or she would have no choice in the matter.

If a person has trouble resisting that extra piece of pie, perhaps a biological weakness is to blame.

On the surface, such arguments might make sense.

It is true scientists are discovering genetic basis for many personality traits. And if people cannot control whether they are born with green eyes or brown, how can they be expected to control other genetic traits?

Adam and Eve blamed a serpent. But the advance of science allows people to blame their genes for their behavior.

But such arguments are flawed in two ways.

First, genes do not equal decisions. If some people are born with a genetic weakness for alcohol, they still have to perform the act of picking up a beverage and drinking it.

The gene is of the one who picks up the alcohol beverage. At some point a choice is made, even if genetics serve as an influence.

Since the beginning of time, people

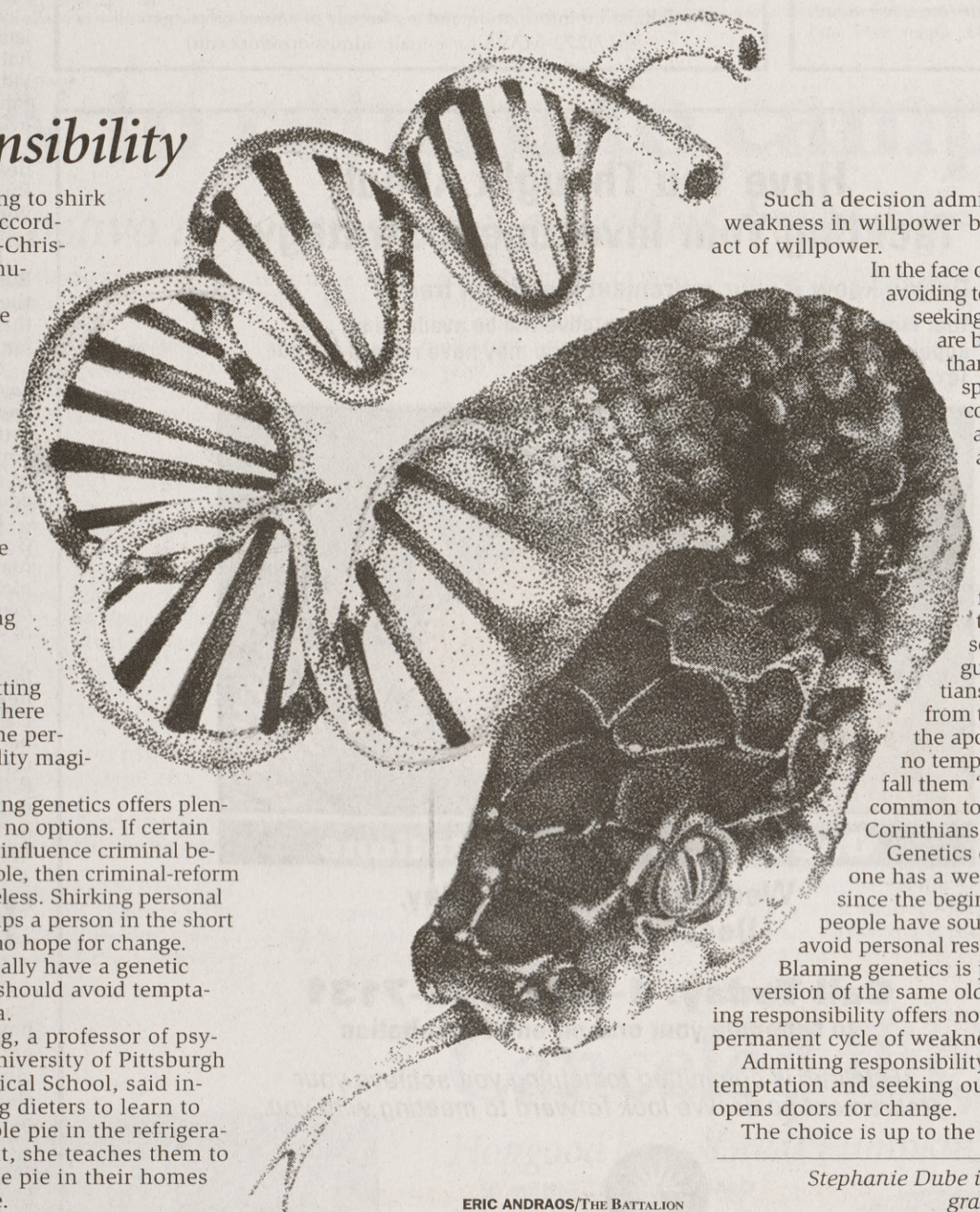
have been seeking to shirk responsibility. According to the Judeo-Christian account of humankind's beginnings in the Garden of Eden, Adam blamed Eve for his disobedience, and Eve blamed a serpent. Despite the negative influences, God still held them responsible for their actions.

Today, blaming genetics is becoming the easy way out. But putting this blame elsewhere does not make the personal responsibility magically go away.

Second, blaming genetics offers plenty of excuses but no options. If certain genes ultimately influence criminal behavior, for example, then criminal-reform programs are useless. Shirking personal responsibility helps a person in the short term but leaves no hope for change.

If people actually have a genetic weakness, they should avoid temptations in that area.

Dr. Rena Wing, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh and Brown Medical School, said instead of teaching dieters to learn to live with an apple pie in the refrigerator and not eat it, she teaches them to not put the apple pie in their homes in the first place.



ERIC ANDRAOS/THE BATTALION

Such a decision admits a certain weakness in willpower but is itself an act of willpower.

In the face of weakness, avoiding temptation and seeking outside help are better options than avoiding responsibility. Alcoholics, for example, may admit their need for counseling with Alcoholics Anonymous. People of faith can turn to religious resources for guidance. Christians seek help from the promise of the apostle Paul that no temptation will befall them "except what is common to man" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Genetics or not, everyone has a weakness. And since the beginning of time people have sought ways to avoid personal responsibility. Blaming genetics is just another version of the same old song. Avoiding responsibility offers nothing but a permanent cycle of weakness.

Admitting responsibility, avoiding temptation and seeking outside help opens doors for change.

The choice is up to the individual.

Stephanie Dube is a journalism graduate student.

Columbine lawsuits unwise

The gunshot echoes from the Columbine High School shootings have yet to subside. The latest reminder of the incident comes from parents who are now looking for an outlet for their grief. But as positive and inspirational as these individuals have been, they are now returning to normalcy and the American habit of litigation.



ELIZABETH KOHL

Last week marked the six-month anniversary of the Columbine shootings and the state deadline for filing lawsuits against the government in this case. Even though several of the victims' parents waited until the last minute to jump on the bandwagon, CNN reports that at least 18 lawsuits are in the works.

These lawsuits are not parents seeking monetary restitution for the loss of their children, because state law already limits the settlements in government cases to \$600,000. Instead, they are expensive, misguided outlets for the anger stemming from their great losses.

Several lawsuits point fingers at the school district, claiming school security was incapable of preventing the shootings.

But there are very few, if any, public or private schools in the nation with security systems adequate to stop violence of such magnitude. Even if Columbine had metal detectors at every door, anyone with enough gall to bring that much firepower anywhere would not have given it up easily.

In addition, there is no guarantee the gunmen would not have started shooting before passing through the metal detectors.

Unfortunately for the safety of everyone everywhere, school security systems hardly have the capabilities to handle situations like the one in Littleton.

As technologically advanced as the country is, there is no such thing as a force field that can be put around all teen-agers to protect them from flying bullets.

Instead of seeking litigation which would result in the futile strengthening of school security systems, efforts should be focused on keeping guns from the hands of angry minors, not just stopping them from passing through a set of doors.

The parents seeking closure through these lawsuits need to realize there are more positive outlets for the funds that will be spent in the litigation process.

What will be spent on lawyers, court fees and settlements should instead be put into outreach programs, public education and memorial funds. This money needs to be directed into programs which will identify teens with a high likelihood of becoming the next Eric Harris or Dylan Klebold, the Columbine gunmen.

There is little comparison between winning a court case and educating a teacher who recognizes just one troubled pupil, preventing future loss of life.

Every high school in America has cliques of teen-agers who congregate before classes start, gather at lunch or hang out after school.

But suing school officials for being unaware of clashes between these groups is expecting too much of administration.

For a high school to qualify for 5A status, the University Interscholastic League requires a membership of 1,780 students.

In a school of that size, not only is it an impossible task for

administration to be aware of all existing problems, but there are bound to be more than a few individuals who do not get along.

If parents really expect school officials to serve in such a capacity, an extensive agenda must be collaboratively planned by teachers and students to bridge the gap between those running the school and those making up its population.

It is understandable that the parents of the Columbine shooting victims want some type of action to fix all the problems that lead to the massacre.

And while for the moment it may feel as though they are accomplishing something, they are really just spinning in place. If the school systems need to be blamed, then blame their understandable naivete. Blame the childlike innocence of administrators, who had no idea an event of such magnitude could ever take place at their school.

Then ensure no other administration ever makes the mistake of being as unaware of prevailing events as those at Columbine. The cost of shattering such innocence is too high for it to ever exist at all.

Those involved with the Columbine shootings possess not only national sympathy, but the willingness of the public to support the future prevention of actions such as these.

Instead of living in the past, these parents should focus on the future, using their resources to create programs to reach students in need of help. The creation of such programs would be a greater tribute to those who died than any lawsuit.

Elizabeth Kohl is a junior accounting major.



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BIG YELLOW TAXIS

Complaints from taxi drivers about CARPOOL unfounded

Some local taxi companies are complaining CARPOOL is unfairly taking them of profits by offering service for free. But it is clear they have no compelling argument. CARPOOL offers free rides on weekends to students who are too intoxicated to drive themselves or simply need a lift.

The group, made up entirely of volunteers, provides an organized service of designated drivers. Founded in good faith and operated with success, CARPOOL performs a needed service to community and student safety. Many have taken advantage of its safe alternative to drinking and driving.

But some taxi drivers see things differently. They claim CARPOOL is taking a slice of their market, made up in large part by weekend patrons of Northgate.

CARPOOL undoubtedly does take some business away from taxi drivers, but this competition is not inequitable.

CARPOOL is made up entirely of volunteers performing a free service. The law does not prevent benevolent, concerned citizens from volunteering their time and money.

If the altruism of others burdens another business' bottom line, business simply has to adapt to a changing market. Taxi companies should not be surprised students are more likely to ride home for free rather than for \$20.

And while drivers may not like the fact, their only options are to hide some incentive for choosing them over a free ride or to cut costs and raise prices in an effort to compensate for lost business.

More importantly, taxi drivers should stop seeing dollar signs through to see the dangers of drunk driving.

Slightly the greater good of reduced drinking and driving is worth the cost of a small decrease in profits. CARPOOL has even pressed a willingness to cooperate with taxis to pursue community goals, without creating competition.

Therefore, taxi drivers should stop acting this highly responsible student up of irresponsibility.

Sanctions do not help Iraqi civilians

In response to Mark Passwaters' Oct. 27 column.

Passwaters says nine full years of sanctions have caused the standards of life for Saddam and the rest of the Ba'arhis to rise and then says the sanctions should stay in place.

But the United States cannot stay as the gendarme of the world forever.

People who are not under sanctions and live an acceptable

lifestyle can be more of a force in fighting against a dictator than people who have time only to think about how they are going to survive.

The Iraqi people themselves are aware Saddam Hussein is a brutal dictator, but sanctions have left them with no energy to fight against him.

The next time Passwaters decides to write a column about the future of a nation on the other side of the earth, he should see things from this point of view.

Khodadad Rezakhani
Class of '99

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