DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

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GENETIC INFLUENCE ON BEHAVIOUR

The two most basic influences on social behavior are genes (the chemical instructions that people inherit from their parents' DNA) and the environment (all other, non-inherited factors).

Genes are instructions that dictate how a person's body is made, in the same way that blueprints are instructions to build a house. Information from genes let the body know what characteristics a person will have, like if they will have hairy or hairless ears and/or a small or big chin. These instructions come from our parents; when their genes are mixed together, our set of genes is formed. This is why we often look like a mixture of our parents! I have my mother's blue eyes, but my father's stature. Almost everyone has different information in their genes, which makes sense given how much diversity there is in how people look and act.

There is an exception-identical twins. Identical twins look exactly the same because each twin shares the same genes as their identical sibling, because when a mother is pregnant, the fertilized egg holds the mixture of genes from both the mother and father. Occasionally this fertilized egg splits into two eggs with the exact same mixture of genes. This results in two identical people who are similar to one another in the way they look and behave.
Genes can carry instructions that can make it more likely for you to develop certain illnesses or conditions. For example, Jennifer and Karen both have genes associated with obesity. Their genes could tell their body to:

- Increase the size of their fat cells or dictate how they use fat in their body

- Release chemicals (like hormones) which control hunger and appetite

Genes do not cause behavioral or personality traits, they only influence them.

In behavioral genetics, environmental influences that cause family members to be similar are by definition shared, and those influences that cause family members to be different are non-shared. In the case of twins, the prenatal environment can typically be considered shared, since the developmental conditions experienced are nearly identical. Peer relation-ships provide an example of non-shared environment: Even identical twins growing up in the same household can behave quite dissimilarly, and part of the reason for this can be different peer groups.