

BOOK REVIEW

Genetics in the Madhouse: The Unknown History of Human Heredity *by Theodore M. Porter*

Hardcover, 464 pages
Princeton University Press
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From the early days of modern madhouses and asylums, proprietors have recorded details of their patients to help determine the causes of their illnesses and to publicise the effectiveness of their treatments. Inevitably, one of the features recorded was family history, which gained prominence in theories of aetiology. With the growth of large state institutions, the collection of data became a science in the 19th Century. Asylum data was some of the earliest, large-scale data published, albeit with insufficient detail to prove or disprove any theory of causation.

The collection of family history within this data encouraged the growth of the eugenics movement, though, as Professor Porter describes, there were many who decried the lack of evidence in the data and the misinterpretation that was occurring. However, the drive continued for further collection of vast banks of psychiatric and “genetic” data. Unfortunately, the science usually assumed Mendelian inheritance of many features such as intelligence or criminality. As the data analysis remained poor, it allowed politicians and extreme thinkers to use the data to justify their views.

This book presents a thorough and detailed analysis of records covering France, Germany, the UK and USA, with forays into other European countries, and reveals some interesting snippets. The revelation from the 1840 US census that Negroes in the northern states had the highest incidence of insanity – much more than slaves – arose from clear transcription errors. The data was not rectified and became ammunition for anti-abolitionists. Porter does not speculate why its correction was not seen as a priority. Or take the 1895 English report on defective children that claimed teachers were able to pick out almost all dull students from their physical features alone – the committee of highly eminent “men of science” appeared very happy that a deformed body predicted low intelligence.

As its title suggests, the book concentrates on the genetic data and some of the hypotheses but does not fully cover the eugenics movement or other social movements of the period. The author does not explicitly mention Laughlin’s model “Eugenical Sterilisation Law”, variants of which were enacted in many US states, though he refers to the German concern that Laughlin’s proposal for mass sterilisation would cause needless fear. The book does not discuss the Nazi eugenics programme in detail but does cover much of the 1930s and how eugenic ideas continued after the war.

Genetics in the Madhouse is a fact-based and sobering read. With a fifth of the book comprising notes and bibliography, it is a rich source of material for those writing histories of psychiatry and disorders of intellectual development who want material to enrich their theories.

Peter Carpenter
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