

# Eugenic family studies

Robert A. Wilson

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The study of traits, characteristics, and behaviour that run in families has played a special role in the history of eugenics. Most significantly for the development of eugenics in North America, a series of family studies, beginning with Richard Dugdale's *The Jukes* in 1877, provided both popular and scientific grounding for the view that criminality, pauperism, and the traits of individuals putatively responsible for them could be traced through family lines. These studies were taken to show the heritability of eugenic traits, and to support the conclusion that forms of negative eugenic intervention, such as institutionalization or sterilization, would be socially and economically beneficial.

Despite their influence and embeddedness in the science of the day, these fifteen family studies, stretching over a 50 year period, were deeply flawed. They have been criticized for their shifting and inconsistent characterization of families, for presuming what they purport to show, and for their failure to consider alternative explanations for the traits they investigated (Rafter 1988, Lombardo 2001).

## Galton on Family Traits

The idea that both physical and mental traits run in families, like the aphorism, 'like begets like', has a history antecedent to eugenics. In the

wake of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), however, these folk genealogical ideas were cast in a larger evolutionary framework.

Darwin's first cousin, Sir Francis Galton, was especially preoccupied with cognitive, personality, and emotional characteristics that were distinctively human, and with showing that these were as subject to heredity as were the physical traits of plants and animals. Galton's initial focus in his work on "hereditary genius" was on showing how social achievement ran in families in ways that supported the conclusion that the traits responsible for this pattern were heritable.

### **The Jukes and the Origin of the Eugenic Family Studies**

Around the time that Galton attempted to demonstrate that talent and ability were inherited by examining the patterns of reputation, accomplishment, and profession in British elite families, concerns about expanding reliance on public charity in New York State generated the first of what became a very influential series of family studies. This initial family study was of a family given the name "The Jukes". Based on public health work in the mid-1870s by Elisha Harris, a doctor specializing in infectious diseases who later became the corresponding secretary of the New York Prison Association, Richard Dugdale's *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity* was motivated by a concern with understanding poverty, criminality, and alcoholism. Beginning as part of the 1874 annual report of the Prison Association to the New York state legislature, this study was published in book form in 1877, with further reflections on its implications presented at a Conference of Boards of Public Charities that same year (Rafter 1988).

The study itself focused on reconstructing genealogies of 42 families that could be traced to a common ancestor. A putatively disproportionate number of these family members had been imprisoned, had engaged in behaviour deemed criminal or immoral, or

were economically impoverished. Despite Dugdale's own resistance to hereditarian explanations of the genealogies that he identified, *The Jukes* became a model for future family studies—*The Tribe of Ismael*, *The Kallikaks*, *The Nam Family*—and was often cited in those studies. The resulting publications, many of which were funded directly by the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, most notably those by Arthur Estabrook and Henry Goddard, played an influential role both in the science of eugenics and in the social movement of eugenics that this research fed.

### **An Overview of the Eugenic Family Studies**

The complete series of family studies falls into two unequal clusters, bisected by the first decade of the 20th-century and the development of the Eugenics Record Office (Davenport 1912a, 1912b; Davenport and Laughlin 1915). Eleven of these studies have been conveniently reprinted by the criminologist Nicole Rafter in her *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies* (1988).

Following *The Jukes*, three other family studies were published by the century's end: Oscar McCulloch's *The Tribe of Ishmael* (1888), Frank Blackmar's *The Smoky Pilgrims*, and Albert Winship's *Jukes-Edwards: A Study in Education and Heredity* (1900). The studies by McCulloch and Blackmar are brief, focusing on families in Indiana and Kansas, respectively. All three studies explicitly locate themselves in a lineage of studies of degeneracy, criminality, and pauperism.

Winship's book-length study, however, relies more extensively on *The Jukes*, beginning with a short summary of Dugdale's study and using this to structure the book around the contrast between the Jukes family and the family of a prominent figure in American intellectual history, Jonathan Edwards. In doing so, Winship's book both brings together Galton's original focus on families of high achievement and introduces what would become a narrative that framed the most

influential future family studies: a tale of two families, one degenerative, the other high achieving.

Ten of the other eleven family studies were published from 1912 until 1926 after the founding of the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor in 1910 by Charles Davenport; the remaining publication, *Hereditary Criminality* (1907), was an interpretative summary by Gertrude Davenport of a European study published in German by Jörger in 1905 on a Swiss family referred to as The Zeroes. These ten included seven works that were produced by ERO staff or trainees: Florence Danielson and Charles Davenport's *The Hill Folk: Report on a Rural Community of Hereditary Defectives*, Arthur Estabrook and Charles Davenport's *The Nam Family: A Study of Cacogenics*—both published in 1912—Mary Storer Kostir's *The Family of Sam Sixty*, Anna Wendt Finlayson's *The Dack Family: A Study in Hereditary Lack of Emotional Control*, and Estabrook's *The Jukes in 1915*—all published in 1916—Mina Session's *The Feeble-Minded in a Rural County of Ohio* (1918), and Arthur Estabrook and Ivan McDougale's *Mongrel Virginians: The Win Tribe* (1926), published shortly before the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Buck vs Bell*.

Two other family studies—Henry H. Goddard's *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (1913) and Elizabeth Kite's *The Pineys* (1913)—as well as Kite's *Two Brothers* (1912), which reflects the work that Kite did on *The Kallikak Family*—derive from research undertaken at the Training School at Vineland, of which Goddard was director and by which Kite was employed as a fieldworker. The remaining work in the series, Arthur Rogers and Maud Merrill's *Dwellers in the Vale of Siddum* (1919), was also produced by a training school director and a co-worker; Rogers was the superintendent of the Minnesota School for Feeble-Minded at Fairbault for more than 30 years.

## Themes and Critical Analysis of the Eugenic Family Studies

Despite the variation within these family studies, they conveyed a basic, shared message: that the costly social degeneracy manifest in undesirable traits, including the central eugenic trait of feeble-mindedness, clustered in family lineages. As the studies developed, they came to contain more definitive hereditarian interpretations and to incorporate kinship lineage diagrams, photographs, and tabular representations that displayed data and offered support for conclusions in visually compelling forms (cf. Lombardo 2001).

In general terms, the trajectory of the eugenic family studies followed the general path of the eugenics movement towards professionalization and integration with the emerging biological and psychological sciences. The five family studies published before the establishment of the Eugenics Record Office in 1910 were carried out by people with limited training in those sciences. Dugdale was in small business and developed his interests through volunteer work in the prison system; McCulloch was a pastor based in Indianapolis, working with charitable organizations; Blackmar was a professor of history and sociology at the University of Kansas; and Winship was an educator with a pastoral background. Of these five authors, only Gertrude Davenport had substantial training in biology—in zoology. By contrast, Davenport, Goddard, Estabrook, Rogers, and Merrill all had doctoral qualifications in these fields, while Danielson, Kostir, Sessions, and Kite had undergone field eugenic training under the supervision of Davenport or Goddard.

In spite of this trajectory and the increasingly scientific appearance that the family studies took on, they did little to justify the hereditarian interpretations they offered of the social or psychological traits that they investigated. One deep flaw in this regard is the failure to distinguish between traits as manifest characteristics with unknown

causes and traits as intrinsic properties of the individuals who have them, stemming from their biological or psychological nature. Without a sensitivity to that distinction, and a clear delineation between the two, the masses of data generated collectively by the family studies provide no reason to infer hereditary causes from family lineage data. The authors of these studies had no way to determine whether, say, "feeble-mindedness" was inherent to a person long dead or known to the authors only by description, or was a result of that person's circumstances.

### **Cite this document (APA):**

Wilson, R. (2014, April 29). Eugenic family studies. Retrieved December 31, 2019, from <http://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/encyclopedia/535eebbb7095aa0000000225>

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