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Psychology Gone Astray: A Selection of Racist and Sexist Literature from Early Psychological Research. Charles I. Abramson and Caleb W. Lack (Editors). Fareham, Hampshire, United Kingdom: Onus Books, 2014, 362 pages, \$29.99 paperback. \$9.99 Kindle.

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In the introduction to this unique book, the Editors of *Psychology Gone Astray: A Selection of Racist and Sexist Literature from Early Psychological Research*, make the point that “. . . as academic psychologists, we were surprised how few students, and even colleagues, knew about this chapter in the history of psychology” [p. 1],¹ referring to the involvement of early psychological researchers in the conduct and perpetuation of blatantly racist and sexist theory. The depth and breadth of coverage in this volume is unique, not just for what is presented but for the pragmatic nature of the presentation. The Editors uncover unpleasant facts, but do not leave the reader to walk away offended. Their challenge is presented in the form of a number of thought-discussion questions and activities for more deeply-engaged students. If used diligently, the discussion questions and activities would likely secure a sizable percentage of students to see beyond the offensiveness of this literature, and to see why the writers and researchers of this period were just “doing science” as the psychological science of that day was conducted. The discussion questions could help students adopt what has been termed an historicist view of history instead of the more easily adopted presentist view or hindsight (Seidman, 1983; Stocking, 1965).

In assuming a historicist posture, the discussion questions and exercises allow one to view these as much more than just archaic, crude sexist and racist writings. The Editors also present a cogent overview of methodological issues in comparative research and pose a question that more psychologists need to ponder: “What is it that makes a field of study a science?” [p. 21]. This reviewer thinks that far too many psychologists would simply answer with something like “the use the scientific method” or “the use of inferential statistics and hypothesis testing.” Abramson and Lack lead the reader through a stronger case for what makes a field of study a science, with the examination of five key features: the purpose, the variables, the design, the results, and the presence or context of other factors that may influence the method. The Editors’ discussion of methodological issues provides important context within which to read these primary sources of early psychological research. As Boring (1950) argued, an understanding of history requires an understanding of the larger historical forces operating upon the individuals who lived in a particular time and culture. The individuals who conducted these studies and authored these papers were probably not racist or sexist in any way out of the ordinary, in their zeitgeist. They were simply conducting research as scientists of their day went about the practice of science.

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¹All page numbers in brackets [] refer to pages in *Psychology Gone Astray*.

As for the actual writings presented, Abramson and Lack include over 20 primary sources by prominent psychologists and theorists, ranging from James Cattell to William McDougall and to Alfred Binet's assistant, Theodore Simon. Also included are now-recognized early feminist psychologists such as Leta Stetter Hollingworth and Helen Thompson Woolley. The various primary sources can be roughly grouped into categories of research articles on racial and/or ethnic differences in abilities, sex differences in abilities, and questions regarding the inheritance of mental abilities and/or the measurement of intelligence. Finally there are a number of eugenics-slanted articles on the issues of insanity, inferiority, and/or "degeneracy" in women, American Indians, Latinos (Mexicans), Africans (Negroes), Jews, various European groups, and poorly defined groups such as different European "races" and "savage races."

Race

Theoretical stances conceptualized as empirically-supported hypotheses of "racial inequality" based on evolutionary theory (Dennis, 1995) were used by Galton, Spencer, and others, but Darwin himself was not involved nor concerned with this; he more directly contributed to the issue of race with his 1871 work *The Descent of Man*. The Editors of this volume present a quote from Darwin's (1839/1996) *Voyage of the Beagle*: "If the misery of our poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin" (p. 503). Considering that "the poor" more likely included racial minorities and other disadvantaged or disenfranchised groups such as non-English speaking immigrants, the apparent tone of Darwin does not come across as racist or hereditarian. However, in other places, Darwin described the people of Patagonia and the Tierra Del Fuego archipelago in subhuman terms (Darwin, 1839/1996, p. 213). Other writers have argued that Darwin also contributed to the sexism of the zeitgeist. Shields and Bahtia (2009) concluded that "He [Darwin] believed that the intellectual, sensory and physical capacities of females were inferior to those of males, across the board" (p. 114). One has to put that quote in a historicist perspective; in the mid-nineteenth century, relatively few men would have viewed women as equals. Darwin's positions here did not represent outliers.

Abramson and Lack present a very thorough and methodically researched lead-in with their introduction to the actual writings. Race psychology, also known as "empirical racism," was closely tied to the "science" of eugenics; these articles come across as the least empirically supported, but besides eugenics' caricature of theory, the "variability hypothesis" is a recurring theme. The arguments of the variability hypothesis are that the normal distribution of male traits and abilities had significantly more variation than the distribution of female traits and abilities, i.e., the distribution of female abilities was represented by a much narrower bell curve, with far fewer women ever displaying superior ability or traits characterized as eminence. While this means that more men would be represented at the lower end of the normal distribution, men would also be over-represented at the highest part of the distribution (Noddings, 1992). Surprisingly, at least to this reviewer, in this small sample of the relevant literature, more than one writer made reference to Lloyd Morgan's (1895/1903) thoughts as justification for their conclusions. The Editors point out the a priori assumptions of theorists who presented non-falsifiable interpretations of their findings.

Sexism

An example of mainstream early 1900s sexist psychological science is an article by James Cattell (1903), presenting his list of the 1,000 most eminent men from 600 BC to the first

half of the nineteenth century. Cattell explained that he arrived at his list of eminent men by searching various popular biographical dictionaries and encyclopedias from America, England, France, and Germany. Since he was developing a list of eminent *men*, Cattell admitted that women simply do not have an important place in his compilation of names from other lists, women being represented by only 32 individuals. He explains that with the exception of the poet Sappho, “. . . women have simply not excelled in poetry or art” [p. 61]. Furthermore, according to Cattell, the areas of art and poetry are environments in which women *should* find a favorable milieu. Cattell appealed to the then-popular belief of the variability hypothesis (Noddings, 1992) as justification for his findings and conclusions.

In contrast, Woolley (1914) rebutted the burgeoning literature on the variability hypothesis. “During the four years since my last review of the literature of the psychology of sex, the number of experimental investigations in the field has increased to such an extent that whereas it was difficult at that time to find anything to review; it is now impossible to review all I could find” [p. 167]. In another of the primary sources reproduced by the editors, Hollingworth (1916) also disproved the variability hypothesis, concluding, as had Woolley, that the supposed greater variability of males was simply not found in the existing data.

Eugenics

Burt (1912) presented the eugenics perspective in his review of the inheritance of “mental characters,” which appears to refer to both mental abilities and capacities and the likelihood of enduring improvement in these as a result of the environment. Burt made three assertions: eminence and genius are strongly inherited, feeble-mindedness is even more strongly inherited, and that the effects of the environment (i.e., training, educational experiences, etc.) on specific practices are very limited, with no generalization to other mental abilities. Burt (1912) noted Lloyd Morgan as a competent authority on evolution and mental faculties being subject to selection in one individual’s lifetime but not being inheritable by the offspring.

Morgan’s canon is used as a justification by several writers. Morgan’s canon stated that “In no case may we interpret an action as the outcome of the exercise of a higher psychical faculty, if it can be interpreted as the outcome of one which stands lower in the psychological scale” (Morgan, 1895/1903, p. 59). One researcher went so far as to suggest a “canon of racial psychology” based on Morgan, and this suggestion is given the rationale of guarding against racial bias, e.g., by Garth (1921): “In no case may we interpret an action as the outcome of the exercise of an inferior psychical faculty, if it can be interpreted as the outcome of the exercise of one which stands higher in the psychological scale, but is hindered by lack of training” [p. 219]. Despite this cautionary posture he concluded that “mixed blood” Indians tended to achieve higher measures than “full blood” Indians on a variety of tests. Garth doubted that any equality of school attainment would remove the differences between the groups.

Sterilization and Infanticide

This review has left some of the worst for the last. Amongst the more inflammatory and racist arguments made by the eugenicists, the literature lacked any pretense of scientific research and simply argued that something radical had to be done about the social problem of increasing numbers of degenerate “idiots” and the insane. The British physician, R. R. Rentoul (1910-11) pleaded that, “. . . we can, by sterilizing a large number

of mental degenerates, people classified as habitual criminals, and vagrants, lessen the total of this world's suffering . . ." [pp. 79–80]. Rentoul's statements, made in Great Britain, were hardly cultural aberrations. To properly contextualize the eugenics position from a presentist perspective, consider what the revered American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes concluded in 1927. Holmes argued that society should not wait for the inevitable outcome of non-intervention in affairs of genetics and human reproduction: "It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind" (Buck v. Bell, 1927, p. 274).

Abramson and Lack present the a priori bearing of these writers and one of the most illustrative is that Kenealy (1911). This writer argued that a case of a robustly healthy and fit infant, born to sickly and unfit parents, while initially presenting a quandary for the eugenicists, actually represents an instance of "devolution." "A degenerate, in short, may be defective and patently abnormal, or he may be a mere revision to a former and inferior type. . . . One which was perhaps normal to an antecedent evolutionary epoch in the stock from which he sprang . . ." [p. 82]. According to Kenealy, once in the very remote past, the single-celled amoeba possessed a "latent aspiration" to evolve, to become human, and in the present, the aspiration of the single-celled organism is now fact. The cells, however, making up the human, can lose touch with the vital aspiration and undergo de-evolution, or as Kenealy (1911) said: "The moment, however, that the cells . . . conform, without protest of pain or of disability, to a lower grade of being, Devolution has begun. In that moment, man, having emerged from, has taken the first step in reverting to, the single-celled amoeba. My 'healthy' infant, his cells ceasing to aspire, and conforming without protest to the lower grade to which they have relapses, has turned back his face to the darkness whence his kind have come" [p. 84].

Abramson and Lack accurately represent the attitude of the literature from 100 years ago, and expressly capture the tone of the original sources. Instructors and students rarely read primary literature, let alone primary sources such as represented here. Nothing can properly reflect the timbre of such empirical racism and sexism as the writers themselves. Not all undergraduate students will be able to contextualize this literature. This volume could more likely be used by an instructor of an Honors course in the History of Psychology and or a similar course in the History of Ideas or the History of Discrimination.

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