The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness (1912), by Henry Herbert Goddard

In 1912, Henry Herbert Goddard published The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness, hereafter The Kallikak Family, in which he argues that people inherit feeble-mindedness, which is presently known as intellectual disability. Feeble-mindedness, according to Goddard, is the source of, what he refers to as, degeneracy, including behaviors such as alcoholism, criminal behavior, prostitution, and sexual promiscuity. At the time Goddard wrote his book, many researchers questioned whether people inherited what they considered bad traits, such as feeble-mindedness, criminality, and immorality, and what people could do to get rid of such bad traits. Those ideas reflected the emerging eugenics movement of the early twentieth century. In The Kallikak Family, Goddard explores ideas central to eugenics, including how people can increase good traits and reduce bad traits in the population. For decades, supporters of eugenics cited The Kallikak Family as proof that people inherit such traits, but more recent investigations have discredited Goddard's research as bad science, poorly conceived, and biased.

In September 1906, Goddard began investigating the causes of feeble-mindedness and the special needs of the feeble-minded as director of the research laboratory at the Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys, hereafter the Training School, in Vineland, New Jersey. In 1908, Goddard travelled to Europe and learned of a test that French psychologist Alfred Binet had developed to measure general intelligence in children of thirteen years and younger. When he returned home, Goddard translated the test to English and began to use it to evaluate the children at the Training School. According to historian Leila Zenderland, the results gave Goddard what he considered an objective method to classify children according to intelligence.

Goddard divides The Kallikak Family into six parts, including a Preface and five chapters. In the Preface, Goddard discusses what led him to embark on the study and describes his methodology, including the use of the Binet intelligence test at the Training School. He then turns to Chapter I, which introduces the reader to Deborah Kallikak, a young girl at the Training School who is the focus of the study. He recounts Kallikak’s history and her recent behaviors and achievements. In Chapter II, Goddard describes the process by which he gathered the data, particularly discussing the discovery of the two family lines of the Kallikaks, the good line and the bad line. In Chapter III, Goddard explains, what he calls, the natural experiment that the two Kallikak lines provide. By natural experiment, he refers to the two family lines of the Kallikaks, both descending from the same man, Martin Kallikak, although having different characteristics and outcomes. In Chapter IV, Goddard provides short biographies of members of the Kallikak family to illustrate the difference between good and bad heredity, according to Goddard. Lastly, in Chapter V, Goddard discusses his point of view that the “moron” type is society’s greatest problem, and he presents suggestions for how to deal with that problem.

In the Preface, Goddard states that he began the study of the cause of feeble-mindedness by sending workers to interview the families of the children at the Training School. According to Goddard, the workers found that among approximately sixty-five percent of three hundred families, there were children who were feeble-minded or displayed behaviors that indicated mental deficiency. Goddard states that the workers decided to diagnose a family member as feeble-minded, based on information from informants in the community, including family members and the descendants of family.

In Chapter I, called “The Story of Deborah,” Goddard describes Deborah's first appearance at the Training School, when she was eight years old in October 1898. Goddard provides information about Deborah, including her school records, appearance, behavior, achievements, and activities.

Goddard particularly notes that the teachers wrote that Deborah could do better if she would only pay attention or try harder. Goddard writes that those notes show the reluctance of the teachers to admit that Deborah is, according to Goddard, feeble-minded. Then, Goddard presents the results of the Binet test that he gave to Deborah in 1911, when she was twenty-one years old. According to Goddard, the results of that test show that Deborah received a mental age of just over nine years. Goddard further writes that subsequent tests over the next year gave the same results, indicating that those patterns demonstrate the typical illustration of, what Goddard refers to as, a moron. Specifically, Goddard notes that Deborah was the kind of woman that would live in reformatories and cause difficulties and trouble. Goddard concludes Chapter I, saying that the answer to why Deborah is feeble-minded is heredity.

Then in Chapter II, titled "The Data," Goddard discusses the workers and their training, as well as how they gathered the information for the study. According to Goddard, the workers were women who spent weeks at the Training School and became familiar with the conditions and behaviors of the students. Then, the workers interviewed the families of the children at the Training School. They obtained information about how the individual lived, his or her reputation in their communities, and his or her general behavior. On the basis of that information, according to Goddard, the workers were able to determine whether the family was feeble-minded or not. In some cases, Goddard decided that the information was insufficient to make such a determination.

Continuing in Chapter II, Goddard states that, while investigating Deborah and the Kallikak family, the workers found that the family lived in an area near the Training School that produced several of, what he refers to as, defectives and delinquents. Because of that, Goddard states that he decided to survey the entire Kallikak family over several generations and later discovered that there was, what he refers to as, a great amount of feeble-mindedness within the family. Also, Goddard writes that the workers also uncovered information about another family that also held the Kallikak name, stating that that family included, what Goddard refers to as, respectable people. Goddard reports that the workers later found that a man named Martin Kallikak, who was the great-great-grandfather of Deborah, was the son of a man, also named Martin Kallikak. Goddard states that the elder Kallikak illegitimately fathered Deborah's great-great-grandfather with a feeble-minded tavern worker but later married another woman, becoming the ancestor of, what Goddard refers to as, the good line of Kallikak family. In Chapter II, Goddard also includes a subchapter, called "The Charts," which includes several visual representations of generations of the Kallikak family.

Then in Chapter III, called "What It Means," Goddard further discusses the history of the Kallikak family. According to Goddard, there are two Kallikak family lines, both descended from the same man but from two different mothers. Goddard writes that each family line lived in the same region and environment but experienced very different outcomes. Goddard cites the large number of, who he refers to as, feeble-minded individuals in the bad line. However, according to Goddard, he did not find any feeble-minded individuals in the good line, which he uses as evidence for his claim that people inherit feeble-mindedness. Because of that, Goddard asserts that those of the "moron" type did not receive care, and people did not prevent those people from reproducing and passing their traits on to subsequent generations. Further, Goddard suggests that many of those who live in mental hospitals are feeble-minded. Specifically, he reports that twenty-six percent of one hundred admissions to a reformatory were feeble-minded, and sixty-six percent of one hundred cases of children in the Detention Home of the City of Newark in Newark, New Jersey, were feeble-minded. Goddard states that he made those determinations on the basis of intelligence test results, but he notes that the workers' observations yield even higher percentages.

In Chapter IV, titled "Further Facts About the Kallikak Family," Goddard includes more detailed stories of some of the Kallikak family members, specifically those of the bad line, or the line that descended from Martin Kallikak and the tavern worker. The workers based those stories on what they observed of the bad line or learned from descendants of acquaintances of those individuals. Goddard also provides some photographs of the Kallikak family members of the bad line. As a contrast, Goddard also gives some descriptions of the Kallikak family members of the good line, or those descended from Martin Kallikak and his wife, who Goddard describes as a good Quaker woman.

Finally, in Chapter V, called "What Is to Be Done?," Goddard suggests that segregating and placing

feeble-minded individuals in institutions may prevent continuing feeble-mindedness in society. Goddard notes that if the feeble-minded tavern worker, who was the ancestor of the bad line of Kallikak family, had been segregated in an institution, then that would have prevented reproduction and thus the bad line of Kallikak family. However, Goddard writes that it is expensive to house and care for, what he estimates, a large number of feeble-minded people. Goddard estimates that number to be approximately three hundred thousand, in the US during 1912. In addition to segregating those people, Goddard mentions another method to prevent feeble-mindedness, called sterilization, or an operation that removes the reproductive function of people. However, he notes that there are objections to this method, because according to Goddard, the public opposed sterilization or any alteration of the natural human reproductive function. He also notes that it would be difficult to determine who should receive sterilization. Goddard concludes that sterilization is not the main solution to the problem but may be useful until institutions can segregate, what Goddard refers to as, the feeble-minded from the rest of society.

According to historian John David Smith, Goddard wrote The Kallikak Family as a scientific work that the general public also widely accepted. For example, journalist Joseph Medill Patterson approached Goddard about the possibility of turning the book into a play, though that idea never came to fruition. Also, Joseph Spence DeJarnette, then director of Western State Hospital in Staunton, Virginia, cited The Kallikak Family in a testament to the Amherst County Courthouse in Amherst, Virginia about a one of the state's laws, which allowed the forced sterilization of feebleminded women. That testament then resulted in the US Supreme Court case Buck v. Bell (1927), which upheld that the law was constitutional. According to Smith, in 1914, Karl Wilker translated The Kallikak Family into German, praising Goddard's work and noting that it had influenced the passage of laws that provided involuntary sterilization of feeble-minded persons in Germany during the Nazi regime.

Later, criticism of Goddard's methods and findings as presented in The Kallikak Family began to increase. Various scientists wrote critically about the book, questioning Goddard's techniques, methods, concepts, and use of non-professional workers. In 1940, in the article, "Antidotes for Superstitions Concerning Human Heredity," published in the journal The Scientific Monthly, psychologist Knight Dunlap stated that The Kallikak Family had no merit in the field of psychology. In 1942, Goddard responded to criticisms of his book, writing "In Defense of the Kallikak Study," which he published in the journal Science. In that article, Goddard describes the experience and training of the field workers as evidence that his assessments and conclusions were reliable and correct. Despite that article, scientists continued to criticize The Kallikak Family, including paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould. In Gould's 1995 book, The Mismeasure of Man, he cited James Wallace, then director of photographic services at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, who suggested that the photographs in The Kallikak Familyappeared to be manipulated to make the bad line of the Kallikak family to look sinister and intellectually disabled.

Still, proponents of eugenics used The Kallikak Family to support their ideas and justify involuntary sterilization laws, including in Nazi Germany. However, as historian Leila Zenderland points out, by the latter part of the twentieth century, Goddard's study became an example of the ways science can go wrong. Zenderland further writes that The Kallikak Family is an example of how scientists can allow personal biases and prejudices to wrongly influence science.

Sources

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