

THE SOCIAL PROBLEM GROUP

As Illustrated by a Series of East London Pedigrees

(The Galton Lecture, 1932)

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THE term "the social problem group" first appeared in the report of the Departmental Committee on Mental Deficiency, published in 1929, in the following paragraph :

"Let us assume that we could segregate as a separate community all the families in this country containing mental defectives of the primary amentia type. We should find that we had collected among them a most interesting social group. It would include, as everyone who has extensive practical experience of social service would readily admit, a much larger proportion of insane persons, epileptics, paupers, criminals (especially recidivists), unemployables, habitual slum-dwellers, prostitutes, inebriates and other social inefficients than would a group of families not containing mental defectives. The overwhelming majority of the families thus collected will belong to that section of the community, which we propose to term the 'social problem' or 'subnormal' group. This group comprises approximately the lowest 10 per cent. in the social scale of most communities. Though the large majority of its members are not so low grade mentally that they can be actually certified as mentally defective, it is possible that a not inconsiderable number of them might prove, if examined by expert and experienced medical practitioners, to be certifiable and subject to

be placed under care and control." (Part III, para. 91.)

The idea contained in this paragraph is not new—at least to members of this *Society*—for as long ago as November 1910 there appeared in the *EUGENICS REVIEW* a number of articles from which the idea so clearly emerged that the following comment was made upon it in a leading article in *The Times* of November 7th, 1910 :

"The general effect of these reports is to show the existence among us of a definite race of chronic paupers, a race parasitic upon the community, breeding in and through successive generations, and only to a small extent recruited either from the ranks of unskilled labour or from the sufferers by the ordinary fluctuations of industry or employment.* The existence of families of habitual criminals, preying upon the public in a somewhat similar manner, has long been known . . . but the analogous facts in relation to pauperism have perhaps never before received the full recognition to which they appear to be entitled."

THE METHODS OF APPROACH

The reports referred to and this comment were made upon research which had then been commenced and is still continuing, and the data which I propose to submit are taken from the results of that investigation. Two points should be mentioned at the outset: firstly, that this investigation was not undertaken in relation to pauperism, as might appear from the quotation from *The*

NOTE: Mr. Lidbetter has kindly expressed his willingness to deliver this lecture, illustrated with numerous pedigree charts, to any group or organization which would care to hear it. Communications on this subject should be addressed to the General Secretary of the *Society*.

* At the time this was written unemployment meant very largely the intermittent employment of casually-employed men. This was very different from the post-War chronic unemployment.

Times, but was an investigation into the personal, family, and collateral relationships of persons in a particular district in East London who were in receipt of assistance from private or public funds.

For this purpose, authority having been obtained, the records of charitable organizations and of the local Board of Guardians were examined, and it soon appeared that the records of the latter body were so complete that they included most, if not all, of the persons assisted in the district, or that if by any chance such persons were not included in the official records, some other dependent member of the family was included, and these gave the necessary connection. The method gave the impression that pauperism was the subject of the investigation, but the inquiry was directed to the biological relationship of defectives, and their dependence upon public or private funds was the method employed to discover them.

Secondly, although the conclusions reached in these separate investigations are identical, they have been arrived at by entirely different methods. The Departmental Committee reached their conclusions from an examination of material in the mass—the cumulative effect of statistical data gathered by direct investigation in a number of districts.

In this investigation we have built up the data from investigations into the personal, family, and collateral relationships and conditions—the result produced in biological form. The inquiries are complementary and the conclusions are the same, but the methods we have employed enable us to indicate the possible line of development in these groups, to suggest some causes of their existence, and to make some general observations upon the conditions found to exist.

It is intended as soon as possible to make the results of the investigation public in a complete form and when this is done an attempt will be made to deal with the work on a statistical basis.

At the commencement the work consisted of a collection of pedigrees in selected cases.

These pedigrees were instructive and suggestive. Valuable experience was gained in this earlier work, but from the criticism of it there emerged a much clearer understanding as to what was necessary if the final results of such an investigation were to be accepted. Among these was a recognition that if valid conclusions were to be reached the work must rest upon a statistical basis. Accordingly, on a date in 1923 a complete return was prepared of the individuals to be included in the research—some 2,500 in all—and the work has been so planned that it is hoped to measure the social problem group against the sum of the population in the district concerned. I am not prepared, however, at this stage to deal with the statistical aspect.

Since the publication of the report of the Departmental Committee the question has been raised as to whether there is such a thing as a social problem group. It is this question that I propose to discuss here, and for the purpose I have selected, from the large number in my possession, some of the diagrams showing the inter-relations of the people comprising the social problem group in the district concerned—pedigrees of the families who were dependent upon charity or public funds upon the selected date.

In considering these pedigrees it should be remembered :

(1) That the figures and other particulars mentioned have reference to a date early in 1923.

(2) That persons in receipt of relief on the grounds of unemployment were rigidly excluded from the inquiry. It will be remembered that unemployment relief was at the peak in 1923; and it was felt that the inclusion of such cases would prejudice the acceptance of the results of research, since the unemployed class could not generally or legitimately be said to belong to the social problem group. It should be borne in mind that if the effect of this was to preserve the original character of the investigation, it also resulted in excluding from consideration a number of cases properly belonging to the problem group.

"A RACE OF SUB-NORMAL PEOPLE"

The pedigrees reveal that there is in existence a definite race of sub-normal people, closely related by marriage or parenthood, not to any extent recruited from the normal population, nor sensibly diminished by the agencies for social or individual improvement.

These families are closely inter-married, they breed together in successive generations and have undoubtedly a higher birth rate than that of normal people.

An examination of the pedigrees reveals that, broadly speaking, defectiveness tends to segregate into three main groups :

- 1.—Insanity and mental defect.
- 2.—Physical disability, tuberculosis, etc.
- 3.—The mildly incompetent, "the spiritless and dull people," not pronouncedly defective, but not able to compete with normal people so as to be at all times self-supporting.

Some sample pedigrees will be found folded into the back of the REVIEW in such a way as to enable them to be consulted while reading this article. They represent the conditions in these family groups as they were found, by subsequent inquiry, to be early in 1923. The data are calculated to a date in March in that year.

I regret that one diagram (A6 of my collection) is too large to be printed here, since it illustrates a family with collateral connections, in seven generations from 1770 to 1923. Naturally the information is more complete in respect of recent years. There are 262 individuals shown on it, 136 of whom have been maintained for long or short periods out of public funds. The group is of the mildly incompetent type and very little sickness is shown. There are, however, nine insane and two mentally deficient, nine tuberculous, six epileptic, and one blind. The first chart actually given here illustrates the burden on public funds of a small group of able-bodied members of this family.

INSANITY AND BLINDNESS

Diagram A20 of my collection illustrates insanity with destructive eye disease in four generations, with much collateral and associated pauperism. The diagram was first published, but with much less detail, in 1913 in *Brain*, reporting the observations of Mr. E. Nettleship and myself. Those interested in the optical details are advised to look up that volume. There have since been many developments in the case, and much additional information has come to light, most of which is here included. The association of mental disability and ocular defects had not been described before this case. The ocular defects are partly developmental, partly morbid. The pathological changes are chiefly detachment of the retina, based upon disease of the choroid, but with iritis, and secondary cataract in some cases. Both the mental and the ocular conditions are hereditary. Both conditions are due to a common underlying cause, and do not stand to one another as cause and effect or as accidental coincidences. Syphilis, whether acquired or congenital, does not seem to have been a factor in causing either the mental or the ocular degeneracies.

The paupers shown in this diagram, whether in this immediate stock, or collaterally, undoubtedly became chargeable because they were so poorly endowed mentally or physically, or in both respects, as to prevent them competing with the normal individual so as to be always self-supporting. The numbers in the group are as follows :

In receipt of relief :				
For long periods	*10
Intermittently or for short periods	118
Children in Poor Law schools	16
Insane and Imbecile	†25
Mentally deficient	3
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Total	172

* One of these, born 1825, was in the workhouse on 109 occasions, between 1862 and 1892, when he died. Precise particulars are not available prior to 1872, but since that date he spent 3,092 days in the workhouse.

† Including 7 blind and insane.

It is not possible to reproduce here the whole of this diagram, but the part showing insanity and eye disease is given in Chart II and in Chart VI.

ASSORTIVE MATING AND INBREEDING

These pedigrees show that not only does like produce like, as we should expect, but that there is some subtle and unexplained attraction of like for like in marriage and parenthood amongst the various forms of defectives. Members of insane stocks marry into stocks similarly affected—the potentially insane marry the potentially insane. Feeble-minded inter-marry with the feeble-minded; tubercular stocks inter-marry; whilst the mildly incompetent people in a wider, more general way show the same tendency, but show also bad patches where they inter-marry with the more definitely defective. This tendency would no doubt be found amongst normal people, and on this side contributes towards the intensive segregation of sub-normal people—to reject is to select.

The pedigrees show quite conclusively that there is a social problem group. They also enable us to form an opinion as to the reasons for the existence of that group and enable certain generalizations to be made.

I think that there is no doubt that the reason for the existence of this group is inbreeding—the repeated inter-marriage, generation by generation, of defective people. In some of these stocks inbreeding has been so persistent that defectiveness is a general condition of the members; many of them are actually defective, most are sub-normal in some respect, and all are likely to transmit to their offspring one or other of the defective qualities observable in the stock from which they come. The surprising thing is, not that they produce defectives, but that they ever produce a normal child.

This inbreeding is sufficient to account for the existence of a social problem group and, in relation to the attraction of like for like, explains the segregation into family groups of the different forms of defect already mentioned. It should, I think, be

added that if defectives must marry or become parents it is better that they should be associated in that matter with other defectives than that they should vitiate good stocks or use the strength of such stocks to carry on their defectiveness to further generations.

The high-grade defective and the mildly incompetent, but apparently normal, person present a social problem of the utmost importance and urgency. They far outnumber the definitely defective; they contribute largely to the population of our hospitals, prisons, and other public institutions. They maintain the birth rate of illegitimate children; they assist the propagation of venereal disease and, in this and in other ways, they lower the standard of life and health. They also lower the standard of employable labour because, in these days of standardized hours and wages, they cannot earn the wages in the time allowed.

Wherever these people come into contact with the administrative machine they clog and hamper it in a variety of ways: they create the need for much administrative machinery that, but for them, would not be necessary, and finally, because they are insensible to either public or personal responsibility, their birth rate is higher than that of the normal members of the community. The very need to provide for them and for the social amelioration of their conditions inevitably leads to methods which increase their survival value, both in the sense of production and preservation.

At this point it should be remembered that a large proportion of this group, although apparently normal, are carriers of defective genes in the recessive form and, if they become parents, are likely to have a proportion of defective children.

“INDIRECT TRANSMISSION ”

The indirect transmission of mental disorder, which is illustrated in Charts III and IV, presents another problem of much importance, and I doubt if sufficient attention has been paid to its frequency or significance. It is at present impossible to

estimate the relative frequency of the phenomenon, but it certainly occurs very often and possibly as often as does direct transmission.

Chart V (A11), printed in symbols, illustrates at once the inter-marriage of insane stocks and the difficulties of drawing correct inferences from the particulars shown.

The insane shown upon this pedigree were diagnosed as follows :

- ii. 1. General paralysis of the insane.
- ii. 3. Do.
- iii. 1. Do.
- ii. 4. Non-systematic delusional.
- ii. 5. Puerperal insanity.
- iii. 2. Recurrent melancholia.
- iii. 3. Melancholia.
- iii. 4. Do.

In the case of the mentally defective this problem is peculiarly difficult because it would appear that transmission is even less direct than in the case of the insane. The point is often made that many mentally defective children have normal parents. Whilst it may be doubted, in some cases, whether the parents are really normal, the fact remains that in a large proportion of others the parents are normal in all respects. But an examination of these cases reveals, at some point in the history, evidence of defect; and in a large number of families there are collateral defectives, who show that, although there is no family history of defectiveness in earlier generations, there are sufficient in recent generations, in different branches of the family, to indicate the defective quality of the stock in which the child appears.

“THE LAW OF ANTICIPATION”

There has been much discussion upon the subject of the “Law of Anticipation,” as expounded by the late Sir Frederick Mott in relation to the insane and as shown in the work of the late Mr. E. Nettleship in optical cases.

It seems clear that there is some process of ante-dating and it is important here to

notice the effect of the phenomenon in relation to insanity and other forms of mental disease. The clear distinction between the imbecile and idiot on the one hand, and the insane on the other, has long been recognized both in law and medicine. I need not dwell upon this distinction; it is sufficient to say that the character of the distinction is such that if the defect is hereditary, the difference must have its origin in the gamete—it is distinctive and a true inheritance.

The operation of the law of anticipation (or ante-dating) in cases of insanity is such that if the defect appears in the third or fourth generation, there is in many cases nothing to distinguish the patient from the case of the ordinary congenital idiot or feeble-minded—and this although the insanity in the previous generations may have been typical in all respects.

Chart VI (from diagram A20) illustrates this.

I have no doubt that before I close I shall be expected to say something on the subject of remedial measures. I regret, however, that I can add little to what has already been said upon the subject. The more I learn about the social problem group, the less inclined I am to make suggestions for dealing with it. My function in this article, as in the investigation, is one of diagnosis, and this is much more important at the present time, and in the present state of our knowledge, than attempts to suggest remedies. A case has been made out for voluntary sterilization, and I have no doubt that in certain cases segregation will tend also to limit, if not reduce, the burden the community has to bear. But when the most has been made of these proposals, the major part of the problem remains. We should avoid undue emphasis upon the value of either of these as remedies, remembering that whoever suggests that the problem can be dealt with by a single remedy, must, by that fact alone, be wrong. The present position calls mainly for more thorough investigation. We need a comprehensive and intensive investigation, carried on in an atmosphere of inquiry and

discussion, under proper authority and by competent persons—if they can be found—effectively supported and properly financed. Whilst ameliorative and palliative social measures have been widely and fully developed, this great field of research into human heredity has been neglected. Investigation on the lines I have endeavoured to suggest would not only indicate the dimensions of the problem, but would also afford some indication of the possible lines of remedial measures.

