

“Beyond the Pale”: Tainted Whiteness, Cognitive Disability, and Eugenic Sterilization

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The aim of the eugenics movement in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century was to prevent the degeneration of the white race. A central tactic of the movement was the involuntary sterilization of people labeled as feeble-minded. An analysis of the practice of eugenic sterilization provides insight into how the concepts of gender, race, class, and dis/ability are fundamentally intertwined. I argue that in the early twentieth century, the concept of feeble-mindedness came to operate as an umbrella concept that linked off-white ethnicity, poverty, and gendered conceptions of lack of moral character together and that feeble-mindedness thus understood functioned as the signifier of tainted whiteness.

The aim of the eugenics movement in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century was to prevent the degeneration of the white race. A central tactic of the movement was the involuntary sterilization of people labeled feeble-minded. Between 1927 and 1957, approximately 60,000 Americans labeled either feeble-minded or insane underwent sterilization at state institutions in the name of eugenics. Sixty percent of those sterilized were women, and a large majority of those sterilized were white and poor. An analysis of the practice of eugenic sterilization provides insight into how the concepts of gender, race, class, and dis/ability are fundamentally intertwined. I argue that in the early twentieth century the concept of feeble-mindedness came to operate as an umbrella concept that linked “off-white” ethnicity, poverty, and gendered conceptions of a lack of moral character together, and that feeble-mindedness thus understood functioned as the signifier of tainted whiteness.

My argument proceeds in stages. First, I argue that cognitive dis/ability is a social construction. I use the term ‘cognitive dis/ability’ to specify the generic concept of which ‘cognitive ability’ and ‘cognitive disability’ are particular kinds, just as ‘race’ is the generic concept of which ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ are particular kinds. While the understandings of race, class, and gender as social constructions have circulated widely in academic circles, the understanding of cognitive dis/ability as a social construction is less frequently discussed. Understanding how the concept of feeble-mindedness functioned as a signifier of tainted whiteness in the early twentieth century requires understanding how people in positions of social power constructed and reconstructed cognitive dis/ability over time to serve their own interests.

Next, I argue that the concept of feeble-mindedness was based upon a racialized conception of intelligence, according to which white people supposedly had normal and above normal cognitive ability, while members of other races supposedly had subnormal cognitive ability. This racialized understanding defines cognitive ability as the capacity to make contributions, in a manner appropriate to one’s gender, to the building of civilization. White people were “civilization builders,” while members of other races supposedly lacked the ability to produce civilization. By the early twentieth century, however, the racialized understanding of cognitive ability was used to signify not only the difference between white and nonwhite people but also the difference between pure and tainted whites. Tainted whites were “off-white” (of Eastern European, Mediterranean, or Irish rather than Anglo-Saxon or Nordic descent), poor, or lacking civilization-building skills. White elites feared that declining birthrates among pure whites, high rates of immigration by and high birth rates among tainted whites, and reproductive mixing among tainted and pure whites meant that tainted whites were “not only displacing, but literally replacing the rightful heirs of the great republic” (Jacobson 2000, 162). I argue that white elites deployed the concept of feeble-mindedness to link the different versions of white impurity—off-whiteness, poverty, and lack of civilization-building skills—together.

Furthermore, I examine how feeble-mindedness, once it was linked to tainted whiteness, became gendered. As a sign of tainted whiteness, feeble-mindedness was linked to moral depravity. In women, but not in men, moral depravity was primarily equated with sexual promiscuity. Significantly more women than men were labeled as feeble-minded, committed to state institutions, and sterilized in the first half of the twentieth century, solely due to their sexual behavior. Wendy Kline (2001) documents this, but her analysis ignores how the association between feeble-mindedness and unchasteness resulted from the development of feeble-mindedness as an umbrella concept that linked together various versions of tainted whiteness. Finally, I argue that involuntary sterilization of white people who were labeled feeble-minded should be understood as a case

of tainted white Americans losing—in a very material, physical way—the full protection that whiteness had previously afforded them in a white supremacist society. Tainted white Americans were treated as “beyond the pale”: unacceptable and outside the bounds of protection that white elites established for themselves.

Eugenic sterilization of supposedly mentally deficient white people gave way to widespread coercive sterilization of black, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and American Indian women in the 1960s and 1970s. My emphasis in this essay, however, is on white people, particularly women, labeled feeble-minded. This is not because the sterilization of white women is of more concern. Rather, an examination of the sterilization of white women classified as feeble-minded provides important insights into how the state used the combined construction of race, gender, class, and dis/ability to regulate the reproduction of whiteness.

THE EUGENICS MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

The term “eugenics” was coined by the British naturalist Francis Galton. In 1865, Galton argued in his treatise “Hereditary Talent and Character” that “human mental qualities” could be manipulated or cultivated through selection in the same way that breeders control the qualities of domestic animals (quoted in Jacobson 2000, 154). The idea of promoting reproduction by pure white people while restricting reproduction by tainted white people spread throughout the United States in the late 1800s, spurred by white elites who feared off-white immigration and supposedly inherited forms of “degeneracy” including pauperism, criminality, feeble-mindedness, insanity, and homosexuality. The eugenics movement thrived in the United States during the first three decades of the twentieth century and its influence on scientific research and public policy continues today (Ordovery 2003).

In 1904, Charles Davenport, a biologist at the University of Chicago, received a grant from the Carnegie Institute to establish a genetic research station at Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island. In 1906, he persuaded the American Breeders’ Association, a group founded in 1903 to promote work based on Mendelian genetics, to create a Eugenics Section “to investigate and report on heredity in the human race” and “to emphasize the value of superior blood and the menace to society of inferior blood.” Under Davenport’s leadership, the Eugenics Section established ten different research committees, including Feeble-Mindedness, Heredity of Criminality, Sterilization and Other Means of Eliminating Defective Germ Plasm, and Immigration. “The idea of a ‘melting-pot’ belongs to a pre-Mendelian age,” wrote Davenport. “Now we recognize that characters are inherited as units and do not readily break up” (quoted in Jacobson 2000, 156–58).

Davenport set up the Eugenics Record Office in 1910, and sent out field-workers (most of whom were women) to collect the family histories of people labeled feeble-minded, demented, shiftless, or criminal.¹ Some of the data was published in the “family studies” I discuss below. Cold Spring Harbor became a clearinghouse for data generated by the American Eugenics Society, Eugenics Research Association, Galton Society, Institute of Family Relations, and Human Betterment Foundation.

Davenport also recommended screening at Ellis Island to keep out defective immigrants. In 1912, the United States Public Health Service invited Henry Herbert Goddard, the central figure in the development of the concept of feeble-mindedness in the early twentieth century, to administer intelligence tests at Ellis Island. These tests supposedly demonstrated widespread feeble-mindedness among eastern and southern European immigrants. They were followed by the administration of intelligence tests to 1.75 million army recruits during World War I, which supposedly corroborated Goddard’s results (Jacobson 2000, 166; Gould 1981, 165–66, 196–97). During these years, proponents of eugenics brought their ideas into the public eye. In 1915, San Francisco hosted the Panama Pacific Exposition, which included a eugenics exhibit. One week of the fair was designated as Race Betterment Week. After the end of World War I, eugenics exhibits began to appear at state and county fairs as well (Kline 2001, 14). By the 1920s, eugenics arguments had become standard fare in popular publications like *Good Housekeeping* and the *Saturday Evening Post* (Jacobson 2000, 162).

The widely reported army intelligence test results, coupled with the increasing popularity of eugenicist ideas, led to the most draconian of U.S. immigration laws, the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act. Previous legislation all but prohibited Asian immigration and denied entry to people thought to be feeble-minded, epileptic, insane, chronic alcoholics, paupers, professional beggars, vagrants, or afflicted with a contagious disease. The Johnson-Reed Act reinforced these restrictions and set yearly immigration quotas to 2 percent of the people from each nation recorded in the 1890 census. The 1890 census was used because relatively few immigrants from southern and eastern Europe had come to the United States by that time. Reflecting eugenicist panic over the entry of supposedly feeble-minded, off-white immigrants, the Johnson-Reed Act restricted immigration from southern and eastern Europe to a trickle (Gould 1981, 232; Ordovery 2003, 17–31).

Restricting immigration was only part of the eugenics program. Equally important was preventing supposedly defective people already living in the United States from reproducing. Thirty states passed statutes between 1907 and 1932 that permitted involuntary sterilization of people labeled feeble-minded. Many also permitted sterilization of “moral degenerates” and “sexual perverts showing

hereditary degeneracy,” a category which included homosexuality. In California, where the statute passed in 1909, state hospitals, homes for the feeble-minded, and prisons could sterilize inmates, patients, and convicts for therapeutic, eugenic, and punitive reasons with few restrictions. In 1911, an Iowa statute targeted for sterilization “criminals, idiots, feeble-minded, imbeciles, drunkards, drug fiends, epileptics, syphilitics, and moral and sexual perverts” (quoted in Kline 2001, 78–79). The eugenics agenda also included the prevention of miscegenation. During the same years that sterilization statutes became law, thirty states passed statutes banning interracial marriage (Roberts 1997, 71).

A telling illustration of the gendered understanding of feeble-mindedness as tainted whiteness is the 1927 Supreme Court ruling that upheld the involuntary sterilization of people labeled feeble-minded. Carrie Buck, a white woman, was born out of wedlock to a poor woman who was later labeled feeble-minded and committed to an institution. Court testimony described Buck’s mother as having led a life of “immorality, prostitution and untruthfulness.” Buck’s foster parents committed her at age seventeen to the state institution for the feeble-minded after she gave birth to a supposedly feeble-minded baby as the result of being raped by their nephew (Ordover 2003, 135). Harry Laughlin—a major figure in the eugenics movement who had lobbied for the 1924 immigration act—testified in a deposition, based solely on his examination of Buck’s family records, that Buck’s sexual promiscuity was typical of feeble-minded women and that she belonged to the “shiftless, ignorant, and worthless class of anti-social whites of the South” (quoted in Roberts 1997, 68–69).

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF COGNITIVE DIS/ABILITY

My analysis of white elites’ use of the concept of feeble-mindedness to signify tainted whiteness requires understanding the social construction of cognitive dis/ability. To say that cognitive dis/ability is socially constructed is not to say that there are no differences between people’s intellectual abilities. But just as we have come to understand that gender does not refer exclusively to reproductive organs and that race cannot be simply reduced to skin color, so cognitive dis/ability does not refer solely to cognitive skills. Cognitive dis/ability reflects a history, a dynamic set of discourses and practices, and what people with power in a particular society at a particular point in time believe (or want others to believe) about the nature and meaning of intellect.

Just as feminists and critical race theorists have drawn distinctions between essentialist/biological and social constructivist explanations of gender and race, so scholars in disability studies have distinguished between the medical model and social interpretations of disability.² According to the medical model, what makes people either able-bodied or disabled is the way their bodies function. “Able-bodied” people have “sound” or “normal” bodies; “disabled” people have

damaged or dysfunctional bodies. A person who is disabled can only become able if his impairment is cured. If it is permanent, the person simply has to live with limitations. If these limitations prevent individuals from either participating as full citizens or from receiving equal protection under the law, then this reflects the fact that something is wrong with their bodies.

When we understand dis/ability as a social construction, a different picture emerges. What disables a person is not her physical attributes, but rather that the environment in which she lives makes it difficult for a person with her attributes to function. For example, what disables people who use wheelchairs is not the lack of function of their legs, but rather architecture designed to meet the needs only of people who walk. If buildings, sidewalks, and parking lots were wheelchair accessible, people who use wheelchairs would not be disabled. Furthermore, people who use wheelchairs are disabled when others treat them as if wheelchair use makes the wheelchair user less human. People who use wheelchairs are not disabled in this way when others recognize that requiring a wheelchair for mobility is simply an anomaly: atypical for a human, but not a characteristic that undermines a person's humanity.

Applying a social interpretation to the concept of cognitive disability makes clear that what disables people is an environment in which the definition of a successful or full life is based on limited notions of independence, mastery of certain intellectual and social skills, and competitive accomplishment. People who are unsuccessful in these narrowly defined ways are disabled when they are therefore treated as less than fully human: deprived of the opportunity to challenge themselves developmentally, participate as citizens, use their skills and talents to make contributions to society in ways that are beneficial and meaningful to themselves and others, and enjoy full protection of their rights. Understanding cognitive dis/ability as a social construction requires recognizing that the independence, mastery of intellectual and social skills, and competitive accomplishment that define cognitive ability—as well as the methods for identifying cognitive ability or disability—change over time and reflect the agendas of those in positions of social power.

The analysis of cognitive dis/ability as a social construction began with analyses of the concept of mental retardation as a social construction. In their groundbreaking *Educational Handicap, Public Policy, and Social History: A Broadened Perspective on Mental Retardation*, Seymour Sarason and John Doris argued that “the definition of, attitudes toward, and programs for mentally retarded people have always been a function of the nature of our society and its history. Mental retardation is not a ‘thing’ but an invented concept suffused with social values, tradition, intended and unintended prejudice and derogation—all reflecting the dominant characteristics of our society and its history” (1979, ix). Or, as Robert Bogdan and Steven Taylor explained, “The meaning of the term *mental retardation* depends on those who use it to describe the

cognitive states of other people. . . . Mental retardation is a social construction or a concept which exists in the minds of the 'judges' rather than in the minds of the 'judged.' A mentally retarded person is one who has been labeled as such according to rather arbitrarily created and applied criteria" (quoted in Sarason and Doris 1979, 12).

Echoing these observations, Licia Carlson argues that "mental retardation" defies a medical model or essentialist analysis because the diagnosis itself is subjective and unstable. There is no straightforward etiology for mental retardation, and the label has been, and continues to be, applied to a wide variety of people with a wide range of characteristics. Indeed, the so-called normality from which cognitive disability is seen as a departure is itself an unstable category: there is no absolute quality in contrast to which we can define intellectual abnormality (2003, 158).

Furthermore, Sarason and Doris observed that "mental retardation has been a troublesome [concept] precisely because of the failure to recognize the degree to which it carries meanings far more revealing of 'us' than of those whom we categorize as mentally retarded" (1979, 11). Mark Rapley's work (2004) illustrates this point. In a recent study, he examines how people who consider themselves to be cognitively able frequently perceive others as cognitively deficient based on misperceptions of the latter's communication modes. When people who consider themselves to be cognitively able cannot understand another easily or follow his thought processes, or when he does not give the answers they expect to their questions, they often leap to the conclusion that there is something wrong with him. They often "give up" on understanding him entirely, believing that he is unable to communicate effectively due to his deficit. Yet if they recognized how they fail to communicate with him—by not adapting themselves to his mode of communication, his language use, or his pace—they might find that communication is possible after all. They might realize that what they initially interpreted as his cognitive deficit was really their own lack of communicative skill. Rapley makes this point in relation to people who are labeled "retarded," but it is also applicable to such an instance as a teacher interpreting African American dialects or Spanglish as evidence of a student's lack of cognitive ability. Rapley's results demonstrate the socially constructed nature of cognitive dis/ability and point to the disturbing history of how the criteria marking mental deficiency have often erased the humanity of persons perceived as cognitively deficient.

My focus in this essay is on a particular phase in the social construction of cognitive dis/ability: the deployment of the concept of feeble-mindedness in the early twentieth-century United States. As I discuss in the next section, the concept of feeble-mindedness was based on beliefs about cognitive deficit that developed from earlier racialized conceptions of intellect. By the early twentieth century, the attribution of feeble-mindedness to white people had come to

function as a sign of racial taint: a feeble-minded white person was an impure white person who threatened the supremacy of the white race.

RACE, FEEBLEMINDEDNESS, AND WHITE IMPURITY

The possession of intellect, defined as the capacity to produce civilization, has been the principal distinction drawn by white elites to mark the difference between white and nonwhite races. The aim of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century research into intelligence and race was to validate this assumption. Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, however, a new research agenda emerged that focused on intelligence itself and how to measure it. Because the scientists conducting this research already believed that the white race was intellectually superior to other races, they used this presumed white intellectual superiority as a standard to test the accuracy of hypotheses about how to measure intelligence. A method for measuring intelligence was accurate if it yielded the result that the white race was intellectually superior.

Research that measured intelligence resulted in the formalization of the concept of “feeble-mindedness,” which was previously used informally to describe people who appeared to be cognitively deficient. As “feeble-mindedness” was formalized, two developments occurred.

First, the scientists formalizing the concept came to believe that feeble-mindedness was hereditary. This conclusion was consistent with the racialized heritage of the concept. If intellect and intellectual deficiency distinguish different races, then they must be hereditary, passed down through generations with race itself. Second, feeble-mindedness came to be understood as an umbrella concept that linked together three different versions of white impurity: poverty, off-whiteness, and lack of civilization-building skills. At the time that research into feeble-mindedness was progressing, white elites were becoming increasingly anxious about impure white people, who elites feared were multiplying astronomically and undermining the supremacy of the white race. White elites, including those conducting research into intelligence, began to develop and use the concept of feeble-mindedness as a way to distinguish between tainted and pure whites.

The principal distinction that white elites drew between the white race and other races was the possession of intellect, defined particularly as the capacity to produce what white elites have defined as “civilization.” This includes the development of agriculture, science and technology (in forms that white elites recognize); sophisticated (according to white perception) cultural products such as literature, music, and art; and the development of complex (according to white perception) societal organization and forms of government. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, for example, Thomas Jefferson shared his beliefs about blacks’ lack of reflection, reasoning ability, and creativity—intellectual

capacities required to produce civilization. Although he suggested that their memorization skills equaled those of whites, memory without reasoning ability and creativity does not advance civilization. While he granted that they possessed gifts in music performance, he denied, until proven otherwise, their ability to contribute to civilization through the creation of sophisticated musical compositions (1782). More straightforwardly, French surgeon and anthropologist Paul Broca, whose work on craniometry I discuss below, wrote in 1866 that “a group with black skin, woolly hair and a prognathous face has never been able to raise itself spontaneously to civilization” (Gould 1981, 84).

Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European and American scientists undertook research designed to prove white intellectual superiority. For example, Dutch anatomist Petrus Camper (1722–1789) attempted to analyze racial differences in intelligence by measuring and comparing human and animal skulls. He argued that African skull measurements were closer to those of apes than were Caucasian skull measurements (Graves 2001, 40–41). In the 1840s, Samuel Morton, a Philadelphia physician, assessed the cranial volume of different races by the amount of birdseed or lead shot that different skulls could hold. He concluded that African skulls held less than Caucasian skulls and hence that black people were intellectually inferior to white people (Graves 2001, 45–46).

During the same time that Morton was measuring skulls, however, the rationale behind research into intelligence and race began to shift. The aim of research up to and including Morton’s was to establish scientifically that non-white races were intellectually inferior to the white race. The primary question was “Is the white race intellectually superior?” The accuracy of the methods used to measure intelligence—by reference to skull size, for example—was not in question. The goal of the new research (called “psychometrics”), however, was to find the most accurate method for measuring intelligence. In this research agenda, the intellectual superiority of the white race was assumed to be true and therefore provided a means of evaluating different approaches to measuring intelligence. For example, Broca began experimenting in the mid-1840s with a variety of approaches to measuring intelligence, including measurements of brain size. He reasoned as follows: White people are more intelligent than black people. Therefore, to determine if brain size is an accurate measure of intelligence, one must evaluate how white subjects and black subjects compare using this method of measurement. If black people turn out to have larger brains, this must not be an accurate measure of intelligence, because if it were, then black people must be more intelligent than white people. Because we know that black people are not more intelligent than white people, this shows that the measurement technique is inaccurate (Gould 1981, 84–85).

Research into how to measure intelligence required defining intelligence and intellectual deficit. Thus, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, research

into both normal and defective brain development flourished. Throughout this period of research, white intellectual superiority was taken for granted, while intellectual deficiency was equated with nonwhiteness. In 1844, for example, Robert Chambers proposed a recapitulation theory of human development, arguing, "Our brain goes through the various stages of a fish's, a reptile's and a mammifier's brain, and finally becomes human. There is more than this, for after completing the animal transformation, it passes through the characters in which it appears, in the Negro, Malay, American, and Mongolian nations and finally is Caucasian" (quoted in Kliever and Fitzgerald 2001, 460).

J. Langdon Down, whose name is still invoked in the classification of "Down Syndrome," based his understanding of intellectual deficiency on theories like Chambers's. Expounding upon his original 1866 publication, "Ethnic Classification of Idiots," Down wrote, "I was struck by the remarkable resemblance of feeble-minded children to the various ethnic types of the human family." He proceeded to discuss white feeble-minded children who, "from some deteriorating influence" had been "removed into another ethnic type" and therefore resembled so-called Negro, Malay, North American Indian, or Mongolian people (1990, 4–6).

Down's and other's research into feeble-mindedness in white people paralleled rising white concerns about intellectual deficiency within the white race. These were the years of increasing white fear about white impurity. For example, in their immensely popular 1857 treatise *The Types of Mankind*, Josiah Clark Nott and George Glidden specifically argued that the producers of civilization were the "higher castes" of the white race, not the white race as a whole: "To them have been assigned, in all ages, the largest brains and the most powerful intellect; *theirs* is the mission of extending and perfecting civilization" (1857, 67). Furthermore:

The superior races ought to be kept free from all adulterations, otherwise the world will retrograde, instead of advancing, in civilization. It may be a question, whether there is not already too much adulteration in Europe. Spain and Italy, where the darker races are in the majority, continue still behind in the march. France, although teeming with gigantic intellects, has been struggling in vain for sixty years to found a stable government—her population is tainted with bad elements; and wherever Portuguese or Spanish colonies attempt to compete with Anglo-Saxons, they are left astern, when not "annexed." It is the strictly-white races that are bearing onward the flambeau of civilization, as displayed in the Germanic families alone. (405)

Research into feeble-mindedness reflected concerns about the vulnerability of the white race and the need to preserve it from taint. First, researchers sought

to prove that feeble-mindedness was hereditary. This was a logical conclusion for them to draw, given the well-established belief that intellect and intellectual deficiency were tied to race. But proof of the heritability of feeble-mindedness would also legitimize concerns about white degeneration. Secondly, researchers began to link feeble-mindedness to poverty, off-whiteness, and lack of civilization-building skills: the three versions of white impurity.

Henry Herbert Goddard was the architect of the formalized concept of feeble-mindedness in the United States and the key proponent of the notion that feeble-mindedness was hereditary. In *The Kallikak Family* (1912), he presented now thoroughly debunked “evidence” that Deborah Kallikak (a pseudonym), a resident of the Vineland Training School for Feeble-minded Girls and Boys in New Jersey, was descended from a long line of feeble-minded people (Gould 1981; Smith 1985). He continued his argument for the heritability of feeble-mindedness in *Feeble-mindedness: Its Causes and Consequences* (1914). In this book, Goddard included chapters on “Mendel’s Law of Inheritance” and “Eugenics,” in which he argued that “it is perfectly clear that no feeble-minded person should ever be allowed to marry or become a parent” (quoted in Jacobson 2000, 166–67). In *Human Efficiency* (1920), he wrote:

Stated in its boldest form, our thesis is that the chief determiner of human conduct is a unitary mental process which we call intelligence: that this process is conditioned by a nervous mechanism which is inborn: that the degree of efficiency to be attained by that nervous mechanism and the consequent grade of intellectual or mental level for each individual is determined by the kind of chromosomes that come together with the union of the germ cells: that it is but little affected by any later influences except such serious accidents as may destroy part of the mechanism. (quoted in Gould 1981, 160)

It is important to note that in describing intelligence as hereditary, Goddard also describes it as impervious to environmental influence. Although he later retracted this view, Goddard believed for many years that no amount of educational intervention or change in environment could increase the intellectual skills of a feeble-minded person. His view of intellect as a fixed, inherited quality was congenial to policy makers who did not want to take responsibility for the poor living conditions and schooling of the majority of people living in the United States.

Goddard’s most important contribution to the development of the concept of feeble-mindedness as a signifier of racial taint, however, was the concept of the “moron”—a “high grade” feeble-minded person who could pass for a person of normal intelligence. In 1908, Goddard translated the intelligence test created in 1904 by the French psychologist Alfred Binet and adapted it for use in the

United States. Binet's original scale of measurement included the "idiot," with a mental age of two or younger, and the "imbecile," who had a mental age of three to seven years. In his 1910 research paper "Four Hundred Feeble-minded Children," Goddard added the term "moron" (from the Greek word for foolish, *moronia*) to describe people with a mental age of eight to twelve.

According to Goddard, a moron was "one who is capable of earning his living under favorable circumstances, but is incapable from mental defect existing from birth or from an early age (a) of competing on equal terms with his normal fellows or (b) of managing himself and his affairs with ordinary prudence" (1914, 4). Goddard's concern was that "morons," being previously unidentified, were being educated in regular schools and treated as if they could reach "normal" levels of cognitive development when in fact they could not. "Morons are often normal looking with few or no obvious stigmata of degeneration," Goddard continued, and they were "frequently able to talk fluently; their conversation while marked by poverty of thought or even silliness nevertheless commonly passes as the result of ignorance. . . . So strong is their resemblance to the normal person that . . . there are many people even today who refuse to admit that they cannot be trained to function as normal people" (1914, 4–5).

The category of the moron, a feebleminded person who would not appear feebleminded to anyone except a trained observer, enabled researchers like Goddard—as well as policy makers concerned with promoting the eugenic fitness of the white race—to use feeblemindedness as an umbrella concept to link together white poverty, off-whiteness, and lack of civilization-building skills in white people as related, hereditary forms of white impurity.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term *pauperism* was used to indicate persistent extreme poverty and the moral defect of a supposedly shameless willingness to live on public charity. In Goddard's time, the belief that pauperism was hereditary was already in circulation. In 1877, Richard Dugdale, a social researcher and reformist, published *"The Jukes": A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity*. He used data he had gathered about an extended white family from a largely poor, rural county in New York to argue that pauperism was hereditary and that one of the causes of hereditary pauperism was syphilis. According to Dugdale, a syphilitic parent did not necessarily pass on syphilis to his offspring, but passed on the congenital trait of pauperism the syphilis caused. It is worth noting that, in the view of researchers like Dugdale, having contracted syphilis was itself an indication that something was inherently morally wrong with the person who contracted the disease, namely that he or she was sexually promiscuous (Rafter 1988, 33–47).

"*The Jukes*" was the first of fifteen "family studies," published between 1877 and 1926, of supposedly inherited degeneracy within white families. These studies were investigations of genetically related, extended white families who lived in conditions of rural poverty and who were selected because they

displayed persistent pauperism, accompanied by other forms of degeneracy, over generations. The additional degeneracy of the subjects was described in terms of attributes including (in no particular order) licentiousness, sexual promiscuity, criminality, polygamy, vagabondage, quarrelsomeness, violent temper, sex offense, alcoholism, blindness, epilepsy, insanity, syphilis, and feeble-mindedness (Rafter 1988, 6).

After Goddard introduced the concept of the moron, however, the subsequent family studies increasingly linked pauperism and the other degenerate characteristics to inherited feeble-mindedness (Rafter 1988, 10). In work published under a different name, Nicole Hahn Rafter argued that “obligated to show transmission of specific disabilities, Progressive-era genealogists found feeble-mindedness most suitable to their purposes because it was so easy to attribute. Low intelligence had for some time been associated with low social class; and the intelligence test, introduced in the United States just as the second series of family studies began [1912], was initially so primitive that it actually encouraged use of social class criteria” (Hahn 1980, 12). The classification of moron became available to professionals as a label they could apply to people who might appear intellectually normal to the untrained observer. Rafter observed that, “as the family studies claim hundreds of times over, their authors were able to determine at a glance (or even without one) the mental defectiveness of the rural poor” (1988, 11).

The research of Goddard and other like-minded investigators also linked feeble-mindedness to off-whiteness. In 1912, at the invitation of the United States Public Health Service, Goddard administered Binet tests to immigrants arriving at Ellis Island. According to his results, 83 percent of Jewish immigrants, 80 percent of Hungarian immigrants, 79 percent of Italian immigrants, and 87 percent of Russian immigrants were feeble-minded (Jacobson 2000, 166). In a much larger sampling, tests designed by a team including Goddard and his close associate Lewis Terman were administered to 1.75 million army recruits during World War I. According to published report of the results, based on 160,000 of the tests, Russian, Italian, and Polish recruits had average mental ages of 11.34, 11.01, and 10.74, respectively, making all three groups, on average, feeble-minded. According to the army tests, 37 percent of native-born white recruits also scored in the moron range, which became “a rallying point for eugenicists who predicted doom and lamented our declining intelligence, caused by the unconstrained breeding of the poor and feeble-minded, the spread of Negro blood through miscegenation, and the swamping of an intelligent native stock by the immigrating dregs of southern and eastern Europe” (Gould 1981, 196–97).

The family studies also linked feeble-mindedness to off-whiteness caused by miscegenation. In one study, the family’s afflictions were traced to a liaison between a diseased man and a “half-breed woman.” Members of another family

were described as having a “dusky color” and another family had a “sickly yellow color, on account of the negro blood in [their] veins.” The original member of one family fathered the degenerate line by marrying “an Indian squaw.” A member of another family had “dark gypsy coloring,” and a member of another was described as “a mulatto. Her father was ‘Nigger Ned’ who used to hang around the ravine. . . . Her children show their negro heritage. The oldest boy is an imbecile with very vicious tendencies. He will steal whenever the opportunity offers” (all quoted in Rafter 1988, 7–8).

Finally, feeble-mindedness was linked with a lack of civilization-building skills in two ways: it was equated with a lack of citizenship skills and with a lack of those moral characteristics that make one an upstanding, contributing member of a “civilized” society. In *The Measurement of Intelligence* (1916), Terman identified feeble-mindedness in two Portuguese boys with a lack of citizenship skills:

What shall we say of cases like the last two which test at high-grade moronity or at borderline, but are well enough endowed in moral and personal traits to pass as normal in an uncomplicated social environment? According to the classical definition of feeble-mindedness such individuals cannot be considered defectives. Hardly any one would think of them as institutional cases. Among laboring men and servant girls there are thousands like them. They are the world’s “hewers of wood and drawers of water.” And yet, as far as intelligence is concerned, the tests have told the truth. These boys are uneducable beyond the merest rudiments of training. No amount of school instruction will ever make them intelligent voters or capable citizens in the true sense of the word. Judged psychologically they cannot be considered normal. (1916/1975, 91)

The link between feeble-mindedness and morality was made in the family studies, where feeble-mindedness became the catchall explanation for a variety of characteristics with moral components, such as pauperism, sexual promiscuity, criminality, and vagabondage. Goddard argued that many criminals, most alcoholics and prostitutes, and “ne’er-do-wells” were morons: “We know what feeble-mindedness is, and we have come to suspect all persons who are incapable of adapting themselves to their environment and living up to the conventions of society or acting sensibly, of being feeble-minded” (1914, 571). A few years later, he added, “The intelligence controls the emotions and the emotions are controlled in proportion to the degree of intelligence. . . . It follows that if there is little intelligence the emotions will be uncontrolled and whether they be strong or weak will result in actions that are unregulated, uncontrolled and, as experience proves, usually undesirable” (1919, 272).

The concept of feeble-mindedness that Goddard and his associates developed and formalized became an umbrella concept that linked white poverty, off-whiteness, and lack of civilization-building skills together as related forms of hereditary white impurity. The category of the moron—the feeble-minded person who appears normal but who is prone to immorality, incapable of being a contributing citizen in a democratic society, and who will pass feeble-mindedness on to his or her offspring—was a powerful device for drawing a distinction between tainted and pure white people. The formalized understanding of feeble-mindedness legitimized white elite fears and eugenic public policies including involuntary sterilization.

FEEBLEMINDEDNESS, GENDER, AND THE RACIALIZED IMPLICATIONS OF INVOLUNTARY STERILIZATION

As feeble-mindedness developed as a signifier of tainted whiteness it became gendered. This happened through the identification of feeble-mindedness with lack of civilization-building skills because civilization-building skills are gendered. The result was that in the early twentieth century, women were more likely to be labeled as feeble-minded, committed to institutions, and sterilized.

The belief that white men are intellectually superior to white women was in full force as research into how to define and measure intelligence progressed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In denigrating the cognitive ability of black people, nineteenth-century researchers compared them to white women. German anatomist Carl Vogt wrote, for example, that “the grown-up Negro partakes, as regards his intellectual faculties, of the nature of the [white] child, the [white] female, and the senile white. . . . Some tribes have founded states, possessing a peculiar organization; but, as to the rest, we may boldly assert that the whole race has, neither in the past nor in the present, performed anything tending to the progress of humanity or worthy of preservation” (quoted in Gould 1981, 103). In casting aspersion upon African civilization-building skills, Vogt made clear his belief that white women also do not contribute to the progress of humanity. American paleontologist E. D. Cope, writing in 1887, classed together as lower human forms nonwhite races, all women, southern as opposed to northern European whites, and lower socioeconomic classes of northern European whites (Gould 1981, 115).

Nonetheless, white women did have a contribution to make to the supremacy of the white race: bearing and nurturing children who, if they were male, would contribute to the progress of humanity; and, if they were female, would become good mothers. Impoverished white women and off-white women were thereby unfit mothers: their children would not contribute to the progress of humanity. And, all white women, regardless of class, demonstrated unfitness if they engaged in sexual intercourse outside of marriage. These women did not

comprehend their role in the advancement of civilization: the importance of being a virtuous wife and mother and of controlling their urges for the benefit of their future or current husband and children. As Goddard and others argued, the inability to live up to the conventions of society and to control one's emotions was a sign of lack of intellect. Because lack of chastity indicated these failings, it became equated with feeble-mindedness in women.

By 1910, as Wendy Kline has documented, feeble-mindedness—especially morosity—had become “almost synonymous with the illicit sexual behavior of the woman adrift” (2001, 29).³ According to a statement issued by the California Civic League, “In view of the fact that feeble-mindedness is the most strongly hereditary thing known and that these moron girls are extremely prolific, the need of custodial care of them is so urgent, indeed so necessary if race preservation is of value, that legislation to that end is imperative” (quoted in Kline 2001, 27). Walter Fernald, superintendent of the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-minded, argued in 1918 that, “the high-grade [moron] female group is the most dangerous class. They are not capable of becoming desirable or safe members of the community. . . . They are certain to become sexual offenders and to spread venereal disease or to give birth to degenerate children. . . . The segregation of this class should be rapidly extended until all not adequately guarded at home are placed under strict sexual quarantine” (quoted in Kline 2001, 29).

At the Sonoma State Home for the Feeble-minded, the focus of Kline's study, many of the women referred to the institution on the basis of their sexual behavior—mostly unwed mothers and prostitutes—tested above the moron range on intelligence tests. This was problematic because it challenged the received view that promiscuity was proof of feeble-mindedness. To reestablish this connection, a committee headed by Lewis Terman devised an alternative intelligence test in response. This test measured “social intelligence”: the extent to which the subject was mentally capable of “managing himself and his affairs with ordinary prudence.” Taking unwed motherhood and prostitution as proof of lack of social intelligence, Terman and his coauthors announced that those who lacked social intelligence should be classified as feeble-minded “whether or not the [standard intelligence] test results show them to fall within the usual I.Q. limits of that group” (quoted in Kline 2001, 42).

Strengthening the association between feeble-mindedness and tainted whiteness, another way in which white women supposedly demonstrated a lack of social intelligence was through friendliness with or sexual attraction to black men. During this time, white women were classified as feeble-minded if they had children by black men (Larson 1995, 61–62, 80). Even simply failing to display “the normal aversions of a white girl to a colored man who was perhaps nice to her” was enough for a white woman to be labeled feeble-minded (Roberts 1997, 69). Thus, failing to understand the importance of white racial purity was itself evidence of morosity in white women.

The gendering of moronity meant that women were disproportionately committed to institutions and sterilized. Men who were labeled feeble-minded were institutionalized and sterilized too, because policy makers believed that it was important to keep all feeble-minded people from reproducing. Because men were not labeled feeble-minded on the basis of their sexual behavior, however, more women than men were thus labeled and committed to institutions, and nearly twice as many women were sterilized.

Finally, to grasp feeble-mindedness fully as a signifier of tainted whiteness, it is important to understand that the state-sponsored, involuntary sterilization of tainted whites meant that they had, in effect, lost the full protection that whiteness conferred in a white supremacist society. As Dorothy Roberts argues, coercive reproductive control, in general, and surgical forms of reproductive control, in particular, were first used in what became the United States by white elites against black people. Reproductive control was a fundamental aspect of chattel slavery: slave owners forced enslaved women and men to “breed,” raped enslaved women, and castrated enslaved men whom, for reasons of physical deformity, they did not want to produce children. Castration as a legally sanctioned punishment in the United States was first performed on black men accused of sexually assaulting white women (1997, 22–28, 66). By the end of the 1800s, reproductive control in the form of coercive castrations and vasectomies were performed on white men labeled as criminal, sexually deviant, homosexual, feeble-minded, or insane, while white women perceived as sexually deviant (or feeble-minded or insane) were subjected to clitoridectomy, sterilization, and other procedures (Ordover 2003, 76). Thus we see a shift. Practices of reproductive control that white people found acceptable only when performed on black people became acceptable when performed on white people who were perceived, due to their supposed feeble-mindedness or deviancy, to lack white purity. When the coercive reproductive control of tainted whites became enshrined in law with the eugenic sterilization statutes of the early twentieth century, tainted white Americans were legally distinguished from pure white Americans and lost the full protection of whiteness.

RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND COGNITIVE DIS/ABILITY

Like all socially constructed concepts, whiteness cannot be understood in isolation from other social constructions. The eugenics movement—an extreme attempt to regulate the reproduction of whiteness—is an important lens for understanding that history, a lens in which the intertwined construction of race, class, gender, and cognitive dis/ability is revealed. The concept of feeble-mindedness developed as a catchall category that linked the forms of white taint—poverty, off-whiteness, and lack of civilization-building skills—together into a single classification. As a result of this development, feeble-mindedness

became gendered in a way that led to women bearing the brunt of eugenic sterilization.

The analysis I have presented requires that we recognize cognitive dis/ability as a socially constructed concept that is historically inextricable from the concepts of race, gender, and class. The racialized and gendered conception of cognitive dis/ability has been a powerful tool in the hands of the white, male elite for justifying its conception of itself as the epitome of humanity while providing a basis—cognitive deficit—for discounting the humanity of everyone else. When people who consider themselves to be cognitively able merely protest that their cognitive ability should not be questioned on the basis of their race, gender, or socioeconomic class, they leave unchallenged the concept of cognitive dis/ability itself. This implicitly condones the treatment of those whom our society understands at any given point in time, based on ever-changing standards, as personifying cognitive deficit—people who were labeled “mentally retarded” during the second half of the twentieth century and people who are now being labeled “intellectually disabled.” As Sarason and Doris argued, “The field of mental retardation is a good window through which to look at our society. . . . Changes in conceptions of and reactions to mentally retarded individuals are indicative of major societal changes. When we study mental retardation we are studying our own society and how and why it changes” (1979, 17–18).

Forced sterilization of poor, white, feebleminded women was not simply something terrible that happened to “retarded people.” Nor was it simply something terrible that happened to white women who were “erroneously” labeled as feebleminded due to their sexual behavior or to poor white Americans because they were poor. It was an episode in which a particular group of people became the focus of the fears of the white elite, who had shaped a conception of themselves that they were desperate to defend. At the heart of the idea of whiteness is the idea of purity, and cognitive ability was constructed as the touchstone in a way that linked race to class and gender and created the tangled mess that we are still untangling today.

NOTES

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1. See Rafter 1988; Kline 2001; and Carlson 2001.

2. Just as there is debate among those who endorse social constructivist theories of race about exactly what that means, so there is debate among theorists who embrace

social interpretations of disability about what exactly that means and which of a variety of models is best. The earliest formal expression of a social model of disability was a policy statement issued in 1975 by the Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS), a disability rights organization in the United Kingdom. By the 1990s, the term “social model” was applied worldwide to a variety of different models. In 2001, Vic Finkelstein, one of the authors of the original UPIAS policy statement, argued that the terminology “social interpretations of disability” should be adopted to classify the various different social models that challenge the medical model but with different emphases and theoretical backgrounds (Gabel 2005, 3–8).

3. See also Carlson 2001, 126–27.

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