SOME OF THE SOCIAL ASPECTS OF MENTAL DEFICIENCY IN THE WAGE-EARNING CLASSES

BY

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The scientific staff of the Burden Mental Research Trust, with the authority and approval of its committee of administration, has been fortunate enough to have had the personal co-operation and advice of such experts as the nature of the work in hand appeared from time to time to demand. One of the earliest so to assist was the late Dr. Shepherd Dawson of Glasgow, and it was he who sketched out the lines of the present investigation. His selection of the wage-earning rather than the salaried classes was not due to any inherent belief that mental deficiency is commoner in the former than in the latter, but because at Stoke Park Colony the material was available for the one and not for the other.

The Material for Analysis

The material upon which this analysis is based comprises a series of 1,000 consecutive new admissions to the colony, and its accumulation has naturally occupied several years, hence the impossibility of completing the investigation during the lifetime of its inspirer. The defectives themselves are drawn from thirty-eight of the counties of England and Wales, and are in consequence fairly representative of those of the country's wage-earning classes whose families have had the misfortune to number among them one or more mentally defective children. The chief contributory counties are Middlesex (21.7 per cent.), Gloucestershire (14.8 per cent.), Derbyshire (5.8 per cent.), Essex, Hampshire, Kent, Lincoln, Sussex, and Yorkshire (all between 4 and 5 per cent.), Monmouth and Warwick (3.4 per cent. each), Glamorgan and Nottingham (2.8 per cent.), Surrey and Worcester (2.4 per cent. each), Herefordshire (2.0 per cent.), Bedford, Berks, Cheshire, and Northampton (all just over 1 per cent.), with the counties of Buckingham, Carmarthen, Cambridge, Cornwall, Denbigh, Devon, Dorset, Durham, Leicester, London, Merioneth, Pembroke, Radnor, Rutland, Suffolk, Salop, Stafford, and Wilts (all with just under 1 per cent. each).

Under English law the lives and liberties of mental defectives are very carefully safeguarded, and for the purposes of their subsequent care is demanded an official mass of information regarding the conditions under which they have lived before certification. It is these conditions which, as suggested by Dr. Shepherd Dawson, form the subject of the present study. Their ascertainment is the duty of the various official visitors appointed for the purpose. Reference to Table I will show that in 21.3

TABLE I.—*Diagnosis and Other Details of 1,000 Cases of Mental Deficiency*

Designations	Original Numbers	Defectives with No Homes	Insufficient Information	Remaining Nos. Available for Analysis
1. Idiots ..	207	18 (8.7%)	22 (10.6%)	167 (80.7%)
2. Imbeciles ..	490	117 (23.9%)	90 (18.4%)	283 (57.7%)
3. Feeble-minded	235	77 (32.8%)	12 (5.1%)	146 (62.1%)
4. Mongols ..	66	1 (1.5%)	11 (16.7%)	54 (81.8%)
5. Not certified	2			
Totals ..	1,000	213	135	650

per cent. of the 1,000 cases the defectives had no homes, and in another 13.5 per cent. the official visitors have omitted to perform their tasks or have done so in such a perfunctory manner as to render the meagre information supplied of little or no value. It is much to be regretted that such important information has not been forthcoming for every case.

Defectives with no homes have a social significance entirely their own. In most of these cases the children have been found wandering, deserted by their parents, neglected, abandoned to the care of some public institution, or just moving about from one lodging to another.

Analysis of Housing and Economic Conditions

The original investigations made by Dr. Shepherd Dawson (1931) of the general character of the population from which the patients of the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Glasgow, were drawn covered a wider field than the present one. Both investigations have, however, some common objectives and have been conducted on similar lines. The present analysis seeks to ascertain the housing conditions of the families concerned, the economic basis of their lives, and the anti-social reactions (if any) of the people concerned.

The whole of the results for each and all of these observations is succinctly set forth in Table II, and the more it is studied the more striking the results seem.

TABLE II.—*Analysis of the Social Conditions*

	Mongols	Idiots	Imbeciles	Feeble-minded
(1) Percentage with no homes	1.5%	8.7%	23.9%	32.8%
(2) Houses (number of rooms) :				
One-roomed houses ..	—	2.2%	3.0%	4.9%
Two-roomed	4.4%	4.3%	7.0%	9.8%
Three-roomed	13.3%	10.8%	16.2%	17.6%
Four-roomed	17.8%	25.9%	24.6%	28.4%
Five-roomed	37.8%	42.4%	33.8%	29.5%
Six-roomed	17.8%	10.1%	13.3%	9.8%
Seven-roomed	2.2%	2.2%	1.7%	Nil
Eight-roomed	6.7%	1.4%	Nil	Nil
Nine-roomed	Nil	0.7%	0.5%	Nil
(3) Grade of house :				
(a) Very clean, tidy, well kept	43.2%	38.8%	27.3%	35.0%
(b) Average	48.7%	41.9%	42.9%	30.0%
(c) Dirty, untidy, ill kept	8.1%	19.3%	29.8%	35.0%
(4) Average No. of rooms per house	4.84	4.52	4.28	3.97
Average No. of bedrooms per house	2.70	2.61	2.48	2.18
(5) Average No. of persons per house	5.22	5.61	5.43	5.67
Average No. of persons per room	1.07	1.23	1.27	1.41
(6) Average weekly income in shillings per family	59.52	58.49	50.07	49.72
Average weekly income in shillings per person	11.95	10.42	9.13	8.50
(7) Percentage of families in receipt of public assistance	17.4%	12.1%	21.9%	24.0%
(8) Anti-social reactions	No cases	3 cases	5 cases	46 cases
(9) Percentage of illegitimacy (including incest)	4.54% (0)	4.83% (1)	14.28% (1)	27.66% (1)

Social Significance of the Findings

Before directing the reader's attention to the clearly revealed fact that the feeble-minded are socially much the worst of the four classes differentiated, there may be offered one or two explanatory statements which will help in assessing the social significance of the facts elicited.

The grading of the houses in which the families lived presents several difficulties. On the advice of Dr. Shepherd Dawson three grades were adopted, though some authorities prefer four. Again, observers differ much among themselves in their ideas and estimates of what

constitutes a tidy, well-kept, and comfortable home. In the present analysis of the housing conditions the following has been the basis:

Grade I homes include such official designations as "clean and tidy," "beautiful," "good," "very good," "clean and comfortable," "clean and satisfactory," "excellent," and so on.

Grade II, or average homes, include descriptions like "fairly clean," "clean," "satisfactory," "fair," "good locality," and similar designations for an ordinary average working-man's house.

Grade III (dirty, untidy, and ill-kept) is unmistakable. In the present series it has been described as "dirty and neglected," "always very dirty," "dirty," "bad," "very poor, overcrowded, and dirty," and just "verminous."

As revealed by the figures of these 1,000 cases, the possession and maintenance of a Grade I clean and comfortable home does not depend on weekly income alone. While, naturally enough, the percentage of Grade I homes tends to rise with the higher weekly wages, such homes are found among widows in receipt of only a widow's pension of 10s. a week. First-class homes are indeed found scattered throughout every grade of weekly incomes from 10s. to 100s. It is therefore clear that an individual's personality and higher mental calibre can offset a poverty of income. In other words, poverty alone is not a cause of mental deficiency or of a dirty house. Those families who were recorded as being wholly or partially dependent for their weekly incomes on public assistance drew their sustenance from the usual sources, such as unemployment benefit, pension (war, widow's, and old age), national health insurance, and allowances by separated husbands, as well as the other tolls made by the mentally needy on the better-endowed sections of the community.

The percentage of illegitimacy is surprisingly high in the feeble-minded, in whom it outnumbers all the other classes put together. Not only are many of the patients illegitimate, but they themselves are not infrequently the parents of feeble-minded and illegitimate children. Children of incestuous parentage occurred three times in the series: none among the mongols, and one in each of the other three groups, the case among the feeble-minded being the worst.

The idiot girl—a very gross idiot—resulted from sexual congress between a father and his weak-minded daughter. In the case of the imbecile the parents were brother and sister, the former being a labourer and the latter a certified mental defective. From this incestuous union there was also another male child who was, in his turn, feeble-minded. The feeble-minded girl of incestuous parentage was a particularly shocking result of the cohabitation of a man with his own daughter. From this union there resulted six children, five of whom are definitely known to be mentally defective and who range from gross idiocy to very low-grade feeble-mindedness. This incestuous union was brought to a tragic end by the act of the father, who shot his daughter (the mother of the six children) and then shot himself.

The parents of feeble-minded children are physically, mentally, and morally more like their offspring than are those of the idiots and mongols. Few of the last two are nowadays to be found loose in the community, but of the feeble-minded there are hundreds, or thousands, or more probably hundreds of thousands. Consequently the facts revealed by this study of the social surroundings—largely of their own making—in which the families of the feeble-minded live have an even greater social significance than those concerning only the certified member or members of the family. The social facts recorded refer not to the segregated defectives but to people we see, read about, and meet in some guise or another almost every day of our lives. It might not unnaturally be thought that as the law rates the feeble-minded as of higher mental capacity than the idiots, imbeciles, and mongols, so also would their social conditions and surroundings show a considerable improvement over those of their mentally less well-endowed fellows. But this study reveals the exact converse.

The feeble-minded are shown to live in the worst and most overcrowded houses, to be in possession of the highest percentage of dirty, untidy, and ill-kept homes, to have the largest number of persons per house and per room, to earn the smallest average weekly income, with the largest number of mendicants for public assistance, and in return for the latter to make the largest contribution to the annals of crime.

Anti-social Reactions

In the case of the mongols none of their families was reported as showing anti-social reactions. In the idiots three of the patients themselves had come under the cognizance of the police for such offences as indecent exposure, chicken-stealing, and found wandering. Very similar charges were brought against the five imbeciles. The feeble-minded show a startling contrast to these. In forty-six of the 146 feeble-minded-bearing families (31.5 per cent.) one or more of their members, including the defectives before their certification, had been in the hands of the police on charges of theft, larceny, wandering, attempted suicide, neglect of children, soliciting, prostitution, false pretences, house-breaking, cruelty, and sexual perversions of various kinds. Doubtless such crimes as these are not confined to the feeble-minded—whether certified or at large in the community—but if those who commit them come under the terms of the Mental Deficiency Acts they are more than likely to become permanently immured in homes for the mentally defective. Their more fortunate, though probably equally defective, brethren may escape with the relatively minor punishment of a short sentence in a prison; but how far society is wise or justified in its well-meaning efforts to "socialize" the feeble-minded, thereby returning them to the community to continue their anti-social behaviour, is another and greater problem on which the reader may be left to form his own judgment. The fact remains that the highest legal grades of mental defect largely belong to the class of society with the lowest social conscience, and are the most productive of those asocial reactions legally graded as "crime."

Comments by Dr. Fraser Roberts

For the following comments on the genetic significance of the social facts recorded I am indebted to Dr. J. A. Fraser Roberts, principal investigator to the Burden Mental Research Trust.

The results of this investigation, as set out in Table II, demonstrate very clearly that idiots tend to come from families occupying a social position superior to that of the families which provide institutional feeble-minded persons. The differences in Table II are striking, and show how great, on the average, the difference is. Imbeciles occupy an intermediate position, and the average social status of families providing mongols is superior even to that of those providing non-mongolian idiots.

One factor of possible importance has already been mentioned. There are many persons who, while clinically mentally defective, do not require certification under the Acts. These will practically all fall into the feeble-minded group. In that group only a minority of those potentially certifiable do, in fact, come under institutional care, and, naturally, those who display anti-social reactions, or who come from homes where they are neglected or ill-treated or who have no homes at all, will on the average be more likely to be certified than those more fortunately situated. But while this factor may be of some importance in determining the relatively low social position of the families producing feeble-minded persons, it could not account for the whole, or even for a great part, of the differences shown in Table II. One indication of this is provided by the imbecile group; doubtless the great majority of imbeciles ultimately find their way to institutions, and if this selective factor were of prime importance it could be anticipated that the social status of families providing

imbeciles would not be very different from that of families providing idiots. The table shows, however, that the imbecile group is much closer to the feeble-minded group than to the idiot group.

The findings of Table II are in harmony with some widely accepted views on the inheritance of mental deficiency. Idiots, who fall clearly into Lewis's "pathological group" (Lewis, 1933), will often owe their state to the action of genetic factors, sometimes the action of a single genetic factor; further, these will often be recessive factors. To the extent, therefore, that heredity is responsible, there will be no marked tendency for children and parents to resemble each other: idiots tend to crop up, more or less sporadically, in all social classes. The mongols provide an even more marked difference from mental defectives of higher grade. They, too, tend to crop up at all social levels, and the incidence in higher social categories may be little, if any, less than in the lowest. This is in harmony with the hypothesis that mongolism has a genetic basis, but that only a minority of potential mongols become actual mongols, the other necessary determining factors being non-genetic pre-natal influences of obscure nature, except the well-known predisposing factor of advanced maternal age.

Feeble-minded persons fall equally clearly into Lewis's "subcultural group." They are the tail of the curve of distribution of intelligence. Most of them are no more pathological than are very short persons, only that present-day civilization is too complex for the mentally undersized. Looked at in another way, for every feeble-minded person there will exist in the population a corresponding very gifted person whose intelligence exceeds the average for the community by as much as that of the feeble-minded person falls short of it.

There can be no doubt that heredity plays an important part in determining the level of general intelligence attained by the individual, and, as in the case of bodily stature and other continuously variable characteristics, it is to be expected that inheritance will be multi-factorial—that is, the difference between two individuals will depend, to the extent that it is hereditary, upon a large number of factors. In multi-factorial inheritance there is a clear tendency for parent and offspring to resemble each other; the very dull will certainly have many more very dull children than will the very gifted. It is to be expected, therefore, that the parents of the feeble-minded will themselves often tend to fall far below the average mental level of the community, and this circumstance will necessarily be reflected in the condition of their homes and in the economic plane they occupy, as is shown so strikingly in Table II above.

It is no surprise to find that imbeciles occupy an intermediate position. The fact that they are considerably closer to the feeble-minded group than to the idiots suggests that they have more genetic affinities with the former. In a recent investigation (Roberts *et al.*, 1938) it was shown that the curve of distribution of Binet I.Q.s corresponded to the normal or Gaussian form, characteristic of such measurements as stature, down to an I.Q. of about 45 (in children of about 12 years on the average), but that there was a big excess of persons falling below this low limit. The figure of 45 at the age of 12 might well correspond to about 40 in adults, and a number of persons classified as imbeciles in Table II had I.Q.s above this figure; furthermore, the numbers included in the investigation just quoted were too few to permit the fixing of the limit of normality of the curve with any great precision. But, wherever the line is to be approximately drawn, it is likely that those persons falling below it tend to belong to the "pathological group" and those above tend to belong to the "subcultural group." The imbecile group in this paper undoubtedly includes both types, and so yields intermediate figures. That the figures are closer to those of the feeble-minded group points to the possibility that the majority of the persons here

classified as imbeciles owe their condition, to the extent that it is hereditary, to the combined action of a number of genetic factors.

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Nova et Vetera

F. J. V. BROUSSAIS (1772-1838)

In a paper read before the Section of the History of Medicine of the Royal Society of Medicine on January 11, Dr. J. D. Rolleston said that of the many illustrious medical men who flourished in the first half of the last century none obtained greater eminence during his lifetime, though his doctrines became obsolete before his death, than Broussais, the centenary of whose death was recently celebrated at his birthplace at St. Malo and in numerous articles in the French medical press. Although the work and even the name of Broussais were now almost unknown in this country, an article on him appeared eighty years ago in the eighth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, to which Laennec and Bretonneau, far greater figures in the history of medicine, were not admitted until the fourteenth edition published in 1929. Broussais had little sympathy with English practitioners, whom he regarded as old-fashioned because they did not embrace his doctrines. He called his system "physiological medicine" because he wished to attach more importance to disorders of function than to anatomical changes. All diseases, according to him, were due to irritability of the tissues, and were aggravated by the action of therapeutic agents which exaggerated this property. He regarded the local lesion in disease not as the effect but as the cause of the symptoms of the affected organ, which in all cases was the same—namely, the stomach and intestines. There were, in his opinion, no specific diseases—cancer, syphilis, and tuberculosis were merely the end-results of chronic and often neglected inflammations of the alimentary canal. As he held that inflammation dominated pathology, he urged that an attempt should be made to prevent or at least combat it by an antiphlogistic regimen consisting in debilitants, revulsives, emollient drinks, and, most of all, local or general bleeding, especially by leeches, whereas emetics, purgatives, alcohol, and mercury, which stimulated the gastric mucous membrane, should be proscribed. The enormous vogue enjoyed by leeches as the result of Broussais's teaching resulted in their supply being exhausted in France, and importation of them from abroad took place on an enormous scale. Their extravagant use, though it survived longer than other parts of Broussais's doctrine, fell into disfavour as the result of the teaching of Louis and Chomel in France, Marshall Hall in England, and Skoda in Vienna. Although Broussais's doctrine, in the words of Triaire, was "as seductive in its simplicity as it was exaggerated in its exclusiveness and dangerous in its consequences," it predominated in Paris for about fifteen years, until it was finally overthrown by Laennec, Louis, Andrel, and others.

In the sesquicentennial article on Sir James Clark (*Journal*, January 7, p. 20) Lady Flora Hastings was said to have died of malignant disease of the liver. Though this was the generally accepted diagnosis at that time, the suggestion made by Dr. Colin Macdonald in the *Medical Journal of Australia* (1935, **1**, 241) of tuberculous peritonitis with terminal fatty degeneration of the liver is more likely to be correct. By a curious coincidence Myers and Co. of New Bond Street, in their latest catalogue, are offering for sale a collection of over 200 autograph letters and documents relating to the Hastings scandal.