Comment

Galton in Africa
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With the emerging country of Namibia much in the recent news, it is opportune for psychologists to recall that Francis Galton was the first European explorer of much of that troubled land—then known as South-West Africa—in 1851 and 1852. Though occurring during the pre-psychological phase of Galton’s career, the expedition was not without import for psychology. The trip stimulated Galton’s interest in ethnology and “the human side of geography,” which, according to his own account, later merged with his consideration of Darwinian theory to produce his enormously influential nativistic and hereditarian psychology (Pearson, 1924, p. 70). Thus, to examine Galton’s original ethnological impressions from Africa (Galton, 1852, 1853/1889) is to glimpse some of the roots of modern psychology.

Such an examination is also sobering, because although Galton’s ethnography occasionally shows the flair and enthusiasm that marked his later works, it is most notable for its crude racism. Even granting the Victorians’ general ethnocentrism and the tendency of many African explorers to sensationalize their accounts of the people they found there, Galton stands out as a relatively extreme case. His reports never show the genuine sympathy for Africans which marked such contemporaries as David Livingstone or John Hanning Speke. Further, a comparison of Galton’s accounts with those published independently by Charles Andersson, his assistant on the expedition ( Andersson, 1856), invariably reveals Galton as the one more prepared to believe and tell the worst about Africans.

One typical example is the two comrades’ contrasting derivations of the name Oerlam, a term applied to members of the Nama tribe who had been exposed to Dutch culture in the Cape Colony. Andersson (1856) wrote: “The real signification of the term is doubtful. Some conjecture [it] to be a corruption of the Dutch word oerland, or overland. . . . Be this as it may, the Namaqua-Hottentots consider it as a compliment to be addressed as ‘Oerlam’” (p. 325). Galton (1853/1889) told a very different story: “Oerlam was a nickname given by Dutch colonists to the Hottentots that hung about their farms; it means barren ewe—a creature good neither for breeding nor fattening, a worthless concern, one that gives trouble and yields no profit” (pp. 41-42). In fact, the name derived from orang lami (“old people”), a term Dutch settlers had used for their old and trusted servants in the East Indies. Andersson was both closer to the spirit of the truth and more circumspect in his characterization.

Galton’s reactions to differing native groups varied considerably. He regarded the above-mentioned Nama with cool disdain. When his exploration was temporarily blocked by their fierce Oerlam leader, Galton dressed in his fox-hunting reds and rode his best ox directly into the astonished chief’s house. “I rated him in English, and after a while desended to use an interpreter,” Galton (1853/1889) reported. “I then rode away in a huff, and took up my quarters in the village, and received in great state the humble messages which he sent me. This may seem laughable, but Oerlams are like children, and the manner which wins respect from them is not that which has most influence with us” (p. 70). Galton imposed a European-style “legal code” on the Nama, which they followed for a while but abandoned as soon as he left the country. On Galton, the encounter seems to have left a more lasting impression. Years later in Hereditary Genius, Galton (1869/1972) would argue that the “Negro race” was at least two or three grades inferior to Europeans in natural ability. Part of his “evidence” was the assertion that African chiefs, who presumably represented the very pinnacles of natural ability within their societies, were routinely matched or bested in personal encounters with European explorers, who according to Galton’s reckoning represented only the third or fourth highest categories (out of sixteen) within their populations (pp. 393ff).

Galton was equally contemptuous but much less cool in his interactions with the Herero people, whom he characteristically referred to not by their own name, but by their Nama designation as “Damaras.” This group, whom he found “filthy and disgusting in every way” (1853/1889, p. 60), aroused a violent antipathy that Galton vented time after time in his descriptions. The Damara had “hardly a particle of romance, or affection, or poetry in their character or creed; but they are a greedy, heartless, silly set of savages” (1853/1889, p. 115). When they slept, they lay “huddled together like pigs” (p. 116); and when they bartered, their arithmetical skill was comparable to that of Galton’s dog keeping track of her litter of six puppies: “Taking the two as they stood, dog and Damara, the comparison reflected no great honour on the man” (p. 82). He found the Herero deficient in physical as well as intellectual strength, for, “often as I have had trials in lifting weights and so forth among them, I never found one who was anything like a match for the average of my own men” (1852, p. 159). It is tempting to interpret this last experiment as a vague anticipation of Galton’s Anthropometric Laboratory of 1884, with its incorrect assumption of a positive correlation between intelligence and physical-sensory ability.
At least part of Gallon’s extreme dislike of the Herero seems explicable on psychoanalytic grounds. The Herero were strikingly attractive physically, and even Galton (1853/1889) admitted they would be “striking models for sculptors, for they are tall, cleanly made, and perfectly upright . . . their whole body shines with grease and red paint.” They were also uninhibited in their behavior, and Galton’s panic is palpable as he describes how the nearly naked natives “always crowded round us and hemmed us in . . . laughing among themselves all the time. It is difficult to keep them off” (p. 60). The Herero seem to have posed a constant threat for sensual contact, in imagination if not in reality. Consistent with the psychoanalytic view that the threatened arousal of repressed impulses can produce conscious feelings of disgust and panic, the normally fastidious and emotionally controlled Galton reacted with his irrational abhorrence.

In contrast to the Herero, the Ovambo came as close as any African people to producing a positive response in Galton. Physically unattractive to Galton (1853/1889)—“ugly fellows. . . . entirely a different looking race from the Damara” (p. 109)—the Ovambo were psychologically “safe.” Further, as an agricultural people they had centralized towns and institutions that seemed much more “civilized” than those of the nomadic Nama and Herero. Galton (1852) summarized them to the Royal Geographical Society as “a highly civilized people, and one with strong local attachments, well-ordered, honest, laborious, and neat, yet still with much of the negro in them” (p. 156). Of all the African groups he encountered, only the European-like Ovambo seemed worthy of future initiatives by missionaries or other agents of western civilization.

In sum, Francis Galton returned home from Africa with a strong impression of diversity among its native groups and the conviction that they were all intellectually inferior to Europeans, though to varying degrees. For reasons beyond the scope of this comment, he was disinclined to consider environmental explanations for these differences and presumed inferiorities. Thus he saw Africa as peoples by groups of innately differing, more or less inferior, races. When later combined with Darwinian ideas on inheritance and evolution, this view helped to produce Galton’s hereditarian psychological theories, and eugenics.

These important African impressions clearly had some irrational and ethnocentric bases. In a related vein, Cowan (1977) has documented the extent to which Galton’s early psychological works bear more the mark of political ideology and propaganda than of objective scientific analysis, as if his psychological theory were largely a rationalization for putting the political and social ideas into practice. Thus it seems clear that nonscientific factors played a large role in the origination of Galton’s nativist theory.

In assessing Galton’s overall scientific contribution, of course, one must not lose sight of the fact that he possessed some great personal and intellectual strengths, in addition to the shortcomings emphasized here. With immense ingenuity, curiosity, and vigor, he went on to develop an impressive array of ideas and techniques that he brought to bear on the nature-nurture question: the twin-study method, correlation and regression analysis, and the concept of the intelligence test, to mention but a few. Many are persuaded by the accumulated results of these techniques, which remain at the heart of differential psychology, that Galton’s nativist theory has some genuine scientific merit. If it proves true that there is a substantial innate and inherited component to intellectual variability, such will not be the first case of an accepted scientific theory with at least some irrational origins.

So long as the nature-nurture issue remains unresolved and contentious, however, it would seem appropriate to keep its history in mind. While keeping an open mind as to the scientific status of the issue, psychologists would do well to remember its less than glorious origins and the ease with which it can become entangled with irrational and unscientific attitudes.

REFERENCES

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The Integration of Scientific and Traditional Healing in the Indian Health Service

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The article by Rappaport and Rappaport (July 1981) has special interest for those of us in the Indian Health Service since we have struggled with many of the same issues for quite some time (Meketon, Note 1), though for a variety of reasons have published very little about them (Justice, Note 2). As the authors point out, the issues are complex and the solutions very tentative. Nevertheless, important questions have been raised and might be addressed by a larger audience than has been the case in the past, which is very heartening. Since the article stressed African traditional healing and its relations with scientific practice, I would like to add a few notes from the American Indian scene that might be unfamiliar to or unavailable to readers of the American Psychologist.

Western medicine, as practiced in the U.S. Public Health Service, Indian Health Service, has had relationships