

SERENITY, SELF-REGARD AND THE GENETIC SEQUENCE: SOCIAL PSYCHIATRY AND PREVENTIVE EUGENICS IN BRITAIN, 1930s-1950s

1. Tom Stephens (ed), *Problem Families: An Experiment in Social Rehabilitation*, London, Pacifist Service Units, 1945.

2. John Macnicol, 'Eugenics and the Campaign for Voluntary Sterilization in Britain Between the Wars', *Social History of Medicine*, 2 (1989): p147.

3. See Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain*, Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1990, p222; Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, Harvard University Press, 1995/1985 pp164, 252; Lesley A. Hall, 'Illustrations from the Wellcome Institute Library, The Eugenics Society Archives in the Contemporary Medical Archives Centre', *Medical History*, 34 (1990): 331.

4. Dan Stone, *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2002.

5. Michael Freedan, 1979, cited Greta Jones (1982) 'Eugenics and Social Policy Between the Wars', *The Historical Journal*, 25, 3 (1979): 717

Gillian Swanson

The culture of a civilisation is determined largely by the quality of its family life, for it is in the home that the cultural foundations of each generation are laid ... ¹

The 'eugenic project' has been characterised as outmoded and exhausted since the 1920s, lacking persuasiveness in its ability to inform social policy;² riven with conflict between conservative 'mainline' eugenicists and more progressively-minded 'reform' eugenicists; derided as 'flawed' science in the light of new developments in genetics; regarded with suspicion by liberals as a thinly disguised attack on the 'residuum'; and discredited following the rise of Nazi policies of 'race-cleansing'.³ Moreover, effective historical commentary has been impeded by a trend for polarised evaluation of its credibility or the acceptability of its aims: some writers stress the promotion of negative eugenic arguments by right-wing 'extremist' members,⁴ while others cite the inclusion of eminent progressives in the membership of the Eugenics Society as evidence of its reformist aspirations,⁵ or highlight its support for public health and social welfare measures.⁶

But in assessing the vitality, ambitions and influence of the eugenics project in this period, we should not assume that it exists as a unified and discrete, internally-driven movement with a systematic and homogenous set of aims, or demonstrable policy outcomes. I would like to offer a less summative, less forward-driven account of some developments in eugenic thinking across a couple of decades, one in which it doesn't grind determinedly onwards in pursuit of clear goals - albeit with a few splutters and spats on the way - but in which it tries out a range of options, goes down a few different avenues - including some blind alleys - and one which sees it resulting in surprising and unpredictable outcomes. I would like to argue for the value of the sometimes quite *ad hoc* development of a form of knowledge which was subject to a looser form of governance than that of established disciplines and professional knowledges. Rather than taking this as a sign of its lack of integration into the main stage of policy-formation and legislatively-oriented reform, or of an unscientific and 'amateur' nature that renders it irrelevant, I think we can see the motley composition of eugenics as a positive feature: a sign of its 'thickness', its intricate and dense formation, its responsiveness to the different interests, formations and investments of those who influenced its development. In fact, I'd suggest we should see eugenics as part of -

perhaps even exemplifying - an experimental, interdisciplinary approach to knowledge-formation being developed in this period, one which made a distinctive contribution to modernising the conceptual resources of those forms of social planning designed in the pursuit of national improvement.

To get under the skin of eugenic thought in this period, then, we need to understand its relationship to a set of 'experiments in knowledge' being conducted across disciplinary and professional boundaries. From the 1930s to the 1950s, a period in which eugenics struggles to formulate an 'attitude' to social management of a more responsive kind, a set of interdisciplinary dialogues invigorated eugenic concerns and allowed them to become translated in new ways. The most influential revisionist account of the origin of mental defect in this period was developed in the 1930s by Lionel Penrose, who systematically argued against mainline eugenic accounts of the inheritance of social pathology and the concept of 'the degenerate mind'. Penrose argued that the origin of mental deficiency was 'multifactorial': 'neither environmental, pathological, nor genetic, but some combination of the three'.⁷ His results provided the basis for an interdisciplinary approach to understanding mental deficiency and social pathology, and the force of his evidence for the importance of environmental influences on both of these presented eugenics with the need for its most difficult conceptual adjustments.

But interestingly, although accounts of the impact made by Penrose's model include mention of his expertise in psychology and psychiatry, they give no account of the nature of its influence on his innovation.⁸ It is the impact of new approaches to the psychological factor on studies of social delinquency - and their integration into eugenic thought - that I want to consider here. As eugenics responds to new developments across those disciplines which are put to work in research on mental defect and its link with social pathology, it reconfigures questions concerning the influence of heredity and environment and the development of appropriately designed eugenic measures.⁹ The dialogues I am concerned to investigate represent a less instrumentally-focussed side to eugenic thinking, as it considers the conceptual basis for its own policy-claims. New alignments with psychology and psychiatry allowed eugenics to develop a model of 'character' which could be understood as the platform of individual conduct, providing a means for establishing the eugenic value of individual features as they register on the social.

What becomes clear, is that in this period, evaluating the eugenics movement according to its direct impact upon policy outcomes - or even in terms of the quality of its address to public policy questions such as those of population, or voluntary sterilization - obscures a more disseminated influence - of a language and conceptual repertoire which contributed to the interdisciplinary investigation of a range of 'social problems'. My interest is in analysing eugenics as a cultural knowledge, tracking the assembly of intellectual formations and materials which inform it and through which it

6. Pauline M. H. Mazumdar, *Eugenics, Human Genetics and Human Failings: The Eugenics Society, its Sources and its Critics in Britain*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992; Ann Oakley, 'Making Medicine Social: The Case of the Two Dogs with Bent Legs', in D. Porter (ed), *Social Medicine and Medical Sociology in the Twentieth Century*, Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA, Editions Rodopi, 1997.

7. Cited in Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, op. cit., p162.

8. See for example Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration* op. cit., pp193-225; *ibid.*, p163.

9. Dorothy Porter, 'Eugenics and the Sterilization Debate in Sweden and Britain Before World War Two', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 24, 2 (1999): 145-162; Geoffrey Searle, 'Eugenics: The Early Years', in R.A. Peel (ed), *Essays in the History of Eugenics*, London, The Galton Institute, 1998; Robert A. Peel, 'Editor's Introduction', in R.A. Peel (ed), *Essays in the History of Eugenics*, op. cit.

influences the development of new conceptual frameworks. These frameworks are now embedded in our everyday in a range of ways, in those patterns of family relations and everyday life with which eugenics concerned itself, but also - more to the point for my purposes - in those 'mentalities' through which we adopt an orientation to the everyday, and which help to bring private life into being as a distinct realm underpinned by discernible patterns of individual subjective formation. This implies that we can identify the origin of concepts embedded in the everyday, that the circumstances of their origination are describable, and that by describing them we may see more clearly both their difference from those which inform our present, and the continuities between what may seem to us now to be primitive conceptualisations of intimate life and individual make-up, and our 'modern' understandings of subjectivity.

SOCIAL PSYCHIATRY AND 'PROBLEM FAMILIES': FROM SQUALID HOMES TO TEMPERAMENTAL INSTABILITY

Questions of national character, degeneracy and social anomaly being formulated within eugenics, then, can be seen as part of a more widespread attempt to develop a science of social behaviour in fields which, though they may have appeared distinct or even hostile to eugenics, shared significant areas of common focus, convergence and even exchange. These initiatives have been under-represented in histories of eugenics, psychology and social management in the period. In particular, psychology and eugenics were linked by their attempt to address British culture at the intimate level of 'character'.

In the late 1930s, a group of psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists conducted a set of discussions, based at Cambridge University, concerning the application of their disciplines to the 'problems of complex societies'. These were the disciplines which, it was hoped, would allow pressing practical social problems to be addressed on an intimate level, addressing individual and social behaviour in terms of the organisation of the instincts, temperament and the sentiments. In the publication which resulted from these discussions, psychologists from the Cambridge group promoted their ability to address the distinctively *human* dimension of 'culture': '*the general principle of integration* by means of which these are woven into what may be regarded as a more or less coherent "pattern"'.¹⁰ This principle of integration represents a purposeful dimension to affective life, whose psychological management is critical to safeguarding social futures, in a model which stresses the interconnection of character and conduct: 'the future of human civilization depends to a high degree upon Man's capacity to understand the forces and factors which control his own behaviour'.¹¹

Eugenics adapted this form of inquiry to modernize its own framework for social management and national improvement, moving beyond a dependence on 'intelligence' for assessing national fitness, to questions concerning the development of integrated character as a factor in the management of social

10. R.H. Thouless, 'Problems of Terminology in the Social Sciences', in F.C. Bartlett, M. Ginsberg, E.J. Lindgren and R.H. Thouless (eds), *The Study of Society: Methods and Problems*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Tribner & Co Ltd, 1939, p123, my emphasis.

11. T.H. Pear, 'Some Problems and Topics of Contemporary Social Psychology', in Bartlett et al (eds), op. cit., p3-6; Thouless, op. cit., p121-3; F. C. Bartlett et al, 'Preface', op. cit., p vii.

problems. Drawing on psychopathology for these purposes, C.P. Blacker developed a model of 'social psychiatry' as a platform for a 'preventive eugenics': one which implied a disciplined orientation to the self as the basis of those family relations which would nurture effective future citizens.

General Secretary of the Eugenics Society from 1931-52 and a practising medical psychiatrist, Blacker undertook an expansion of the professional membership of the Eugenics Society, during which time, alongside biological scientists, statisticians and geneticists, he attracted a significant number of prominent academic psychologists and clinical psychiatrists.¹² Blacker saw eugenics as 'an instrument of rational demographic planning and social improvement', and as part of this vision, he promoted an *integrative* eugenics, attempting to align the Eugenics Society with a wide range of organisations concerned with problems of population, public health, birth control and family services.¹³ Not all these attempts came off, and not all the alliances formed were to last, but these associations and dialogues gave Blacker and others a flexibility in their repertoires which allowed them to speak to a concern with social futures and public policy debates, establishing a link between questions of character and social problems.

Much has been made, in recent histories of eugenics, of Blacker's influence on the move from old-guard 'mainline' eugenics to a more liberal 'reform' eugenics, a move which was accompanied by the decline of a model of social inefficiency based on heredity and class, in favour of one which struggled to take on the implications of the multifactorial model in accounts of human 'fitness', including biological and social factors. Blacker has also been seen as responsible for the promotion of 'positive' eugenic measures from the mid-1930s, as a feature of this development of reform eugenics - measures which aimed to improve fertility amongst the 'eugenically endowed' in contrast to those 'negative' measures which aimed to restrict the reproduction of the 'genetically flawed'.¹⁴ But the influence of Blacker's involvement in psychiatry on this shift, and the psychological models he draws upon to reformulate eugenics in this light, have yet to be properly acknowledged. The Blacker I am keen to bring into vision is the Blacker who draws on his knowledge of developments in psychological research to locate the origin of social pathology in instabilities of character. In contrast to a mainline eugenic framework oriented by the prevention of the reproduction of the 'unfit', Blacker's preventive approach to the manifestation of social pathology aimed to identify and encourage the formation of eugenically desirable patterns of character formation. In his work, psychological approaches to social pathology, which revolve around the idea of integrated character, were therefore bound up with - and fuelled by - eugenic thinking.

Blacker's social psychiatry was designed to identify those pathological features of character whose formation implied the presence of social pathology, and the 'problem family' as a category became formed in the image of the terms of this inquiry. In his work, the concept of 'mental defect', based on assessments of intelligence, became infused by the notion of

12. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, op. cit., p195-225; Richard A. Soloway, 'From Mainline to Reform Eugenics - Leonard Darwin and C.P. Blacker', in Peel (ed), op. cit., 1998, p62; Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, op. cit., p169-75; Mathew Thomson, *The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy and Social Policy in Britain, c 1870-1959*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, p189-92.

13. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, op. cit., p195; see also Lesley A. Hall, 'Women, Feminism and Eugenics' in Peel (ed), op. cit., 1998; Soloway, 'From Mainline to Reform Eugenics' in Lesley A. Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880*, Basingstoke, Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000, p118-9.

14. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, op. cit., p170-73; Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, op. cit., p231, 259; Soloway, 'From Mainline to Reform Eugenics', op. cit., p60-62; Macnicol, 'Eugenics and the Campaign ...' op. cit., p151.

‘temperamental instability’, deriving from psychological models of neurosis. Above all, this link became understood in terms of the way private, affective, domestic life informed social behaviour. Blacker’s work helped to inaugurate a moment in the history of British eugenics when psychological models became more important than biological ones - a fairly brief moment, after which genetic science and genetic psychiatry become more prominent - as he attempted to accommodate the idea of inherited temperament alongside the influence of adverse environmental conditions, in his conceptualisation of a generational legacy of social inefficiency. The development of such conceptual approaches allowed eugenic thought to exert a dispersed influence across a range of professional contexts, moving beyond positive and negative eugenic measures relating to biological reproduction, to intervene in the management of those individual features and everyday practices relating to human ‘effectivity’ in studies of delinquency, child welfare, adolescent development, marriage guidance, etc. In this way, eugenics contributed to the modernising of languages of social planning and management, its legacy a distinctive repertoire of conceptual frameworks put to work in the design of programmes aimed at enhancing not simply the quality of the population, but a more elusive object: those everyday patterns of life and features of character which constituted the basis of British national life.

Blacker was much concerned, in the early 1930s, with the argument put forward in the Wood Report, in 1929, that there existed a ‘Social Problem Group’ composed of persons of inferior hereditary constitution. The Wood Committee had been set up to investigate the incidence of mental deficiency in the population, and included several prominent members of the Eugenics Society. Perhaps the most widely cited observation made by the Wood Committee was that the ‘social problem group’ was made up of a small number of families with a high incidence of ‘high-grade’ mental defectives.¹⁵ Its stark picture of a direct relationship between mental deficiency and social pathology formed the subject of debate for over two decades, debates that were characterised by a combination of alarm and uncertainty about how their adverse effects could be prevented and ameliorated.

Blacker’s interest lay in the move made in the Wood Report from mental defect in individuals to those other ‘social problems’ embodied in the families of defectives, which contained ‘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’.¹⁶ But Blacker built on that move to make a further one: investigating precisely those ‘types’ identified as members of the social problem group. And in doing so, he made a distinction between the nature of their ‘conditions’:

If the conditions specified by the Wood Committee as characterising the Social Problem Group be carefully scrutinized, they will be seen to fall into two groups which might be called ‘medico-psychological’ and ‘sociological’

15. C.P. Blacker, *Problem Families: Five Inquiries*, London, Eugenics Society, 1952, p9-10. As he notes, the Wood Committee’s survey was not the first study of the familial incidence of social dependency, for this equation was a key component of the statistical work conducted by Karl Pearson from the 1890s and E.J. Lidbetter’s genealogical surveys conducted between 1910-1923 were influential (see also Carolyn Burdett, ‘The Hidden Romance of Sexual Science: Eugenics, the Nation and the Making of Modern Feminism’ in L. Bland and L. Doan (eds), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires*, Cambridge, Polity Press, p47).

16. Wood Report, cited in C.P. Blacker, *A Social Problem Group?*, London, Oxford University Press, 1937, p2.

respectively, with an intermediate group occupying an uncertain position between these two. Insanity, mental defectiveness, and epilepsy fall into the first group of medico-psychological conditions: pauperism and slum dwelling fall into the second group of sociological conditions; recidivism, unemployment, inebriety, and prostitution are conditions more or less intermediate between the medico-psychological and the sociological.¹⁷

17. Blacker, *ibid.*, p4.

Blacker's first group is classified in terms of what he understands as hereditary mental 'defects' and his second group in terms of environmental, or 'sociological', problems concerning income and housing. But his third - the 'intermediate' group - eludes secure classification, and is defined in processual terms, in the interplay between hereditary constitution and adverse environmental influences. This relationship he understands as central to the development of chronic and recurring social problems. Beyond any one disciplinary or professional remit, the 'problem' which this group constituted called for a meeting of social and psychological approaches. It is this intermediate category which so occupies the attention of Blacker in his attention to 'problem families' over the following two decades, in his attempt to identify those 'intrinsic psychological and moral factors of an unfavourable kind' which actively disposed individuals to present social problems under a defined range of adverse circumstances and which motivated the attention of the eugenicist.

18. C.P. Blacker, *Neurosis and the Mental Health Services*, London, New York, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1948 (first published 1946), p1, my emphasis. This study had a 'considerable effect' on the development of the postwar mental health services and has been seen as a sign of the 'persisting influence' of eugenics, see Kathleen Jones, *A History of the Mental Health Services*, London and Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, p272-73; Thomson, *The Problem of Mental Deficiency*, op. cit., p281; and David Stafford-Clark, *Psychiatry Today*, Melbourne, London, Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1952, pp256-265.

In 1942, Blacker was withdrawn from the army and commissioned by the Ministry of Health to evaluate psychiatric services, investigating the incidence of 'neurosis and allied states'.¹⁸ In his influential report, Blacker called for a preventive psychiatry geared towards those 'mental infirmities' caused by a combination of environmental and genetic factors, combining the diagnosis and treatment of neurosis, testing procedures, child guidance, family planning and 'demographic' measures concerning the reduction of fertility.¹⁹ For Blacker, it was the eugenic project which motivated and equipped psychiatry to extend into new fields, its 'sociological' framework for social improvement and planning driving the development of a social psychiatry that would complement social medicine, treating the community through the framework of character.

19. Blacker, *Neurosis and the Mental Health Services*, op. cit., pxxvi, p104-5.

Blacker defined neurosis in terms of 'maladjustment' and associated it with the social problem group, as the 'principal seed-bed of mental aberrations'.²⁰ A central platform of his approach is the detecting, training and placing of children who demonstrate these features - in fact, it is the core of Blacker's link between the social problem group and the broader principles of his social psychiatry that they should be dealt with preventively, to combat problems of character and conduct eroding those patterns of national life which are the emblem of national efficiency.²¹ But alongside his support for voluntary sterilization and other measures, Blacker also commends the nursery school, as a means of alleviating the influence of conditions in the home on the child and setting demonstrable standards of care for the child which may act to

20. *Ibid.*, p104.

21. *Ibid.*, p48.

re-educate the mother. Approaching the social problem group with the tools of psychiatry, therefore, is not so much a matter of individual pathology and treatment as it is one of developing measures for family planning, domestic training and management, and childcare.²²

Writing in 1952, Blacker identifies the shift from an analysis of the 'problem group' to that of the 'problem family': 'The 'problem group' had been objectively discussed from the outside as a noxious social aggregate; the 'problem family' was sympathetically examined from within as a collection of unhappy and maladjusted human beings'.²³ This suggested problem families were now defined outside of the framework of mental deficiency, and in terms of psychological problems of emotion, affect and individual adaptation which were transmitted through the environment of the home. But the shift to a more 'sympathetic' approach to problem families was far from evident in initial inquiries, even if maladjustment and family relations became the focus for psychiatry. The concept of neurosis which Blacker deploys to discuss maladjustment - 'a simple and on the whole acceptable psychopathology' - suggests a continuity with the 'normal' individual, as neurotics were understood to develop those symptoms which would only afflict others under more extreme conditions.²⁴ But the language which prominent studies in the 1940s applied to problem families - their 'degradation' a 'menace to the community of which the gravity is out of all proportion to their numbers' - suggests a rupture between the normal and the pathological, ascribing their condition to faults of character.²⁵ Wofinden's description of the characteristics of problem families, written in 1944, was probably the most widely circulated description, quoted repeatedly over more than a decade and used as a guide to field-workers for identifying problem families:²⁶

Often it is a large family, some of the children being dull or feeble-minded. From their appearance they are strangers to soap and water, toothbrush and comb ... Often they are verminous and have scabies and impetigo. Their nutrition is surprisingly average - doubtless due to extra-familial feeding in schools. The mother is frequently substandard mentally. The home, if indeed it can be described as such, has usually the most striking characteristics. Nauseating odours assail one's nostrils on entry, and the source is usually located in some urine-sodden, faecal stained mattress in an upstairs room ... Furniture is of the most primitive, cooking utensils absent, facilities for sleeping hopeless ... There are sometimes faecal accumulations on the floors upstairs, and tin baths containing several days accumulation of faeces and urine are not unknown. The children, especially the older ones, often seem to be perfectly happy and contented, despite such a shocking environment ... the general standard of hygiene is lower than that of the animal world.²⁷

Squalid homes, lack of personal hygiene and domestic negligence are the central features of observers' accounts, rather than physical ill-health (there is

22. Family planning includes both family limitation and expansion as well as the spacing of births.

23. Blacker, *Problem Families*, op. cit., p12.

24. Blacker, *Neurosis and the Mental Health Services*, op. cit., p48.

25. Women's Group on Public Welfare (in association with the National Council for Social Services) *Our Towns: A Close-Up*, London, Oxford University Press, 1943, cited in Stephens, *Problem Families*, op. cit., pvi, p1; B. Seebohm Rowntree, 'Foreword', in Stephens, op. cit., pvii.

26. Blacker, *Problem Families*, op. cit., p15.

27. R.C. Wofinden, 'Problem Families', *Public Health*, September (1944), cited in R.C. Wofinden 'Problem Families', *The Eugenics Review*, XXXVIII, 3, October (1946), p128; Blacker, *ibid.*, p15; A.F. Philp, 'The Problem Family and the Social Services', in Winifred Cavenagh, T.A. Ratcliffe, T.G. Rankin and A.F. Philp, *The Problem Family*, London, Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency, 1958, p32.

no sign of malnutrition) or the psychological condition of the children (who are recorded as being happy and contented). The register of maladjustment, here, is a lack of concern with domestic failure and an apparent happiness that can only be understood as pathological - atavistic, even. In fact problem families are characterised by their failure to benefit from improvements in conditions, measures for the alleviation of poverty and welfare services.²⁸ As Wofinden makes it clear, the problem comprises a failure to modernize domestic habits in the image of those measures directed to regulating the patterns of family life: 'these families for one reason or another have not kept pace with social progress and are a brake on the wheels'.²⁹ The happiness of such children, therefore, shows their adaptation to abnormal - primitive, regressive, anti-modern - conditions.

28. Stephens, *Problem Families*, op. cit., p2.

29. Wofinden, 'Problem Families', op. cit., p127.

These studies see environmental conditions simply as a *context* for the expression of those hereditary defects which give rise to patterns of neglect, and which underlie an indifference to conditions of squalor. But while Blacker may align these families with the social problem group, and put significant stress on the squalor of the home alongside other features arising from behavioural abnormality, for him, these are a *symptom* of a deeper problem to be addressed at a psychiatric level: the problem of character. For Blacker, hereditary defects are not simply *expressed* in the context of particular environmental conditions. Rather, they interact with distinct environmental influences to *create* pathological forms of character. The problem is neither purely social, nor mental, nor behavioural, but an 'intermediate' one, as he insists on the reciprocity of genetic and environmental factors in forms of individual pathology. Rather than a static notion of defect as manifesting, unchanged, in problems of character, Blacker's use of the concept of neurosis leads him to propose the problem of character *as something which was not already there*. Problems of character inhere in the movement between individual make-up and those environments within which the 'self' comes to be enacted, rather than in the biological constitution of the individual. This requires a radical readjustment of the intellectual repertoires and technical knowledges which social management can call upon, one which only a hybrid - a social - psychiatry, formed in the meeting ground of psychology and eugenics, can offer.

'THE FINEST FLOWER OF MORAL GROWTH': SERENITY, CONATION AND SELF-REGARD

As the eugenic concern with problem families became informed by psychological definitions, concepts and approaches, the use of psychopathology to identify the features of 'social inefficiency' increasingly brought into view those instabilities of character which predisposed individuals to the effects of adverse conditions, allowing the retention of concepts of inherited constitution alongside the impact of environmental influences. The study of features of character, and the identification of those defined as abnormal, gave Blacker

30. Blacker, *Problem Families*, p16, including sections reproduced from C.P. Blacker, 'Social Problem Families in the Limelight', *The Eugenics Review*, XXXVIII, 3, October (1946): 118, my emphasis.

31. A.A. Roback cites McDougall's *Introduction to Social Psychology* as 'the first systematic attempt to study the groundwork of character by examining its constituents and relationships', stating that it had 'exercised a remarkable influence in psychological circles since its appearance in 1908', A.A. Roback, *The Psychology of Character. With a Survey of Temperament*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Tribner and Co Ltd., 1927, p188.

32. See William McDougall, *Character and the Conduct of Life*, London, Methuen, 1927, and William McDougall, *Ethics and Some Modern World Problems*, New York and London, G P Putnam's Sons, 1924, pvi-vii.

33. C.P. Blacker, *Human Values in Psychological Medicine*, London, Oxford University Press, 1933, p82, p120; C.P. Blacker, *Eugenics: Galton and After*, London, Gerald Duckworth and Co Ltd, 1952, p287-322.

34. McDougall, *Character and the Conduct of Life*, op. cit., p18.

a means of refocusing the object of eugenic attention.

The parents are often of subnormal mentality: the father may be a ne-er-do-well, the mother a conspicuously incompetent housewife. Distinguishable from the mental subnormality, which occasionally amounts to mental deficiency in the legally defined sense, there is often present in either or both parents a *temperamental instability* which expresses itself in fecklessness, irresponsibility, improvidence and indiscipline in the home.³⁰

It is the temperamental factor, as a dimension of character which gives rise to certain forms of conduct, that defines the features of the problem.

It was William McDougall's model of temperament and sentiment that had been promoted as a basis for a social psychology of everyday life by psychologists in the Cambridge group, while his study of character and conduct also constituted a precedent in the convergence of psychological and eugenic analysis.³¹ Working in their meeting ground, he developed a model of psychology which linked questions of character and conduct to the protection of 'the future of civilization'.³² McDougall's work was highly influential in interwar psychology and was cited by Blacker throughout the period of his writing, from his use of McDougall's definition of the different functions of the instincts and the biological basis of instinctual 'tendencies' as part of an innate endowment in 1933, to the association of the sentiments with moral qualities in 1952.³³ There was much that recommended his model to Blacker. McDougall argued that individual make-up depended on the raw material of an enduring structure of inherited constitution or 'native tendencies' made up from primary instinctive dispositions, each instinct - or propensity - being liable to develop to a particular extent as a matter of heredity.³⁴ Individual temperament, therefore, includes constitutional factors which may stimulate any one propensity to excess, or may lead to a morbid deficiency.³⁵ But innate factors are developed by those conditions which bring particular propensities into play 'according to the fundamental principle that use strengthens any function, while disuse allows it to remain relatively undeveloped or to undergo actual decay or atrophy'.³⁶

Perhaps the most important concept in McDougall's model of character was that of 'conation', or purposeful striving. McDougall argued that character is founded in the way the instincts are directed towards certain objects, characterising individuals according to their capacity to strive towards particular goals, a process he saw as the platform upon which character rests: 'Character ... may be directed in the main towards lower or higher goals. *Character of the finest type is that which is complex, strongly and harmoniously organised, and directed toward the realization of higher goals or ideals*'.³⁷ The quality of character, for McDougall, also depends upon the sentiments. The 'selfish sentiments' (relating to individual impulses, such as hunger or fear) must be modified by the 'social sentiments' (such as patriotism or altruism) - as individual will is exercised over the instincts to regulate conduct according to

external demands or constraints. The most fundamental of these sentiments was that of self-regard, its proper functioning allowing the instinct of self-assertion to be tempered by one of self-submission. This implies a socialising of the instinctual tendencies, tempering and channelling them in particular directions as a result of the recognition of social conventions, indicating a process of social adaptation in the individual which is the basis of integrated moral character: 'In this way, *the self comes to rule supreme over conduct*, the individual is raised above moral conflict; he attains character in the fullest sense and a completely generalised will, and exhibits to the world that finest flower of moral growth, *serenity*'.³⁸

As McDougall proposed a psychopathological address to social problems at the intimate level of character, Blacker extended this to elaborate the problem of defect within problem families. Blacker's adoption of McDougall's model of character allowed him to translate the constituent features of that temperamental instability he identified in his account of the problem family into positive descriptors motivating regulation.³⁹ Those 'temperamental instabilities' by which Blacker defined the problem family constituted features which in McDougall's model pointed to problems of conation and the self-regarding sentiment: 'laziness' and 'lack of persistence' (demonstrating a low register of conative persistence); 'indifference to the standards of the community' (an inability to adhere to social standards and ideals which implied an inadequate functioning of the sentiment of self-regard and a weakened effort of will); a lack of foresight and purpose, and an 'obliviousness of all but momentary issues' (suggesting a lack of acquisition of those moral, or social, sentiments which allow the individual to strive towards an object or ideal).⁴⁰ Clearly these point to a lack of effective functioning relating to the fundamental sentiment of self-regard, as 'the fly-wheel and the governor of the whole complex organisation that we call character'.⁴¹

Natural intelligence, argues Blacker, must be associated with a high level of aspiration and the ability to identify ideals and aims and to put them in touch with the sentiment of self-regard, in order that striving may be directed purposively. He refers to this quality, after McDougall, as 'serenity'. For Blacker, then, serenity is that temperamental stability and integrated character which allows effective social adaptation (or 'co-operativeness'). It is therefore a sign of the presence of that 'moral cement which gives shape to what is commonly called character' and is aligned to the 'moral qualities which make for social cohesion'.⁴²

But further, Blacker defines a quality he calls 'genophilia' as one of the most eugenically desirable features, providing the basis for the perpetuation of strengths of character through familial lines. This is more than an interest in posterity, for it also involves the 'feeling for children', and a balancing of the two features of the self-regarding sentiment: self-submissiveness (the 'altruism' which allows others' needs to be put before oneself) and self-assertion (the pride or enjoyment of children as part of the individual's 'larger self', which he refers to as 'egotism') in a well-balanced equilibrium which exercises

35. William McDougall, *The Energies of Men: A Study of the Fundamentals of Dynamic Psychology*, London, Methuen, 1932, p176-79.

36. *Ibid.*, p172.

37. William McDougall, *An Outline of Psychology*, London, Methuen, 1923, p417, my emphasis. See also McDougall, *The Energies of Men*, op. cit., pp116-137, p 117-9, pp172-175.

38. William McDougall, *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, London, Methuen, 1908, p404, my emphasis.

39. See Wofinden, op. cit., and Blacker, *Problem Families*, op. cit., p15, p21.

40. Blacker, *ibid.*, p21.

41. William McDougall, *Outline of Abnormal Psychology*, London, Methuen, 1926, p391.

42. Blacker, *Eugenics: Galton and After*, op. cit., p289.

43. Ibid., p289.

44. Ibid., p291.

45. Ibid., p291, my emphasis.

a unifying and harmonising influence.⁴³ For Blacker, with his eye on the development of a social psychiatry, a 'pre-occupation with children and their welfare' are the emblem of a modern national consciousness.⁴⁴ The criterion of eugenic value which is embodied in this 'condition of sentiment' - a form of altruism embodied in the governance of the care of children - implies a form of character and conduct which is also imprinted into *social* consciousness, a 'mentality' of social care which reflects those ideals of character which underlie the individual capacity for effective parenting. And the social sentiments, directed by an orientation towards the effective care and development of children, are expressed as a feature of the marital relation as much as that of the parental relation, in parents' 'demeanour towards one another and towards children'.⁴⁵

Demeanour, in effect, links moral character to the 'conduct of life'. And the form of demeanour Blacker values as eugenically desirable is encapsulated in the quality of 'serenity'. It is the aim of his preventive eugenics that an encouragement of the qualities embodied in serenity should inform 'positive' measures for promoting effective marital and parental demeanour in the service of social improvement. Thus his positive programme for the reform of character and conduct is formed in the reverse image of those problems of character that beset problem families.

THE 'GENETIC SEQUENCE': ALTRUISM, THE PARENTAL INSTINCT AND PREVENTIVE EUGENICS

Blacker had proposed that problem families should be assessed in terms of the emotional damage to children arising from those instabilities of character which prevented them from creating an environment suited to the developmental needs of the next generation of children.⁴⁶ Temperamental instabilities of parents become translated into environmental influences which act upon those weaknesses of constitution inherited by the child as part of their genetic make-up.⁴⁷ While environmental conditions created by 'unfit' parents included social habits such as heavy drinking, dishonesty, gambling and reckless spending, Blacker lays much greater emphasis on 'internal relations obtaining in the family itself, (most prominently) the attitude of the parents to one another', and their care of the child.⁴⁸

But it is a perplexing fact that despite the recurring observation that the parents of such families are fond of their children, and the children appear happy, Blacker continued to frame the problem family as one in which children were unwanted. But if he followed McDougall's model to its logical conclusion, he would be driven to conclude that lack of care even in the presence of affection suggested an inadequate development of the parenting instinct. Like McDougall, Blacker argued that the parental instinct was a variant of that self-regarding sentiment which underlies integrated character, constituting - in its relation to altruism - its most pure form. A failure to discipline conduct according to the standards of the group and the needs of others, suggest no

46. Blacker, *Problem Families*, op. cit., p25.

47. Ibid., p20.

48. Ibid., p23-5.

basis for the parental instinct as a support for the social sentiments. In this context, affection points instead to the existence of the filial instinct, as a selfish sentiment, based in dependency.

From this point of view, 'unwanted' children are the reflection of a characterological condition and the manifestation of a (defective) ethical orientation: in the absence of the parental instinct, there is no basis on which children may become 'wanted', and if they are not cared for within the context of a parental instinct directed by altruism, they not only become themselves defined in terms of deprivation, but threaten to pass this instability down through their own defective parenting. This establishes a *genetic sequence* through which those forms of incapacity which created deprived children may be handed down as a factor of inherited temperamental constitution unamenable to environmental adjustment.⁴⁹ Blacker thus again proposed an 'intermediate' category, as the genetic sequence acts in terms of the play between inherited constitution and an environment of parenting.

49. *Ibid.*, p27.

Alongside the more clearly-targeted positive or negative eugenic measures - genetic prognosis and counselling, regulation and spacing of pregnancies through birth control, treatment of infertility, artificial insemination by donor other than the husband, and voluntary sterilization - the measures for improving parenting and family relations Blacker promoted included a programme of marriage guidance. This entailed the provision of a 'moral education' to young people from the age of sixteen.⁵⁰ Such measures constituted an ameliorative approach to the formation of character; strengthening the sentiments of self-regard, altruism and genophilia. Blacker's preventive eugenics, therefore, aimed to identify and encourage those elements of the marital relationship and parental capacity which comprised the internal features of the familial environment, in order to help children develop into effective future citizens. This allowed him to formulate a more flexible programme of preventive eugenics, including positive and negative measures, which was to become disseminated through agencies dealing with child welfare, adolescent development, marriage guidance and education for parenting.

50. Blacker, *Eugenics: Galton and After*, op. cit., p297-305.

But the logic of Blacker's emphasis on the development of the altruistic orientation of the parental instinct would suggest a social psychiatry that was able to formulate measures to attend to *defects* of character in families, applying educative measures to both 'promising' and 'problem' families in order to improve the quality of parenting in the general population. Certainly this had comprised the tenor of earlier approaches to delinquency based in psychiatry.⁵¹ But here Blacker's model reaches an impasse: he proposes that the educative measures he identifies cannot be adapted to problem families, unfit parents, or those whose defects of character render them ill-equipped for effective parenting. For though their symptomatology merges inherited and environmental factors, as individuals with *already-formed* characters, those from problem families possess a foundational incapacity - an incapacity whose origins may lie in the interaction of heredity with environment, but which is

51. Grace Pailthorpe, *Studies in the Psychology of Delinquency*, London, HMSO, 1932.

now constitutive of their character.

While Blacker refines his eugenic argument through these two decades to increasingly stress the quality of parenting and education for marriage, then, he was unable to formulate ameliorative measures designed to prevent the perpetuation of the problem family. Blacker's psychological attention was directed to diagnostic (preventive), rather than therapeutic (rehabilitative), questions. For those who were not equipped to develop an integrated character, capable of purposeful striving under the influence of the sentiment of self-regard in order to perform the task of bringing up well-adjusted children, then, he returned to a more archaic model of heredity, seeing them in terms of a lack of capacity for emotional maturation which became understood in terms of social atavism.

Blacker's arguments elide the question of how to redress defects of character amongst the children of such families, and so he had only negative measures to propose to avoid the 'genetic sequence' eroding the character of the next generation. In its failure to identify ameliorative measures which could be put to work in favour of these children, then, Blacker's social psychiatry left the genetic sequence unchecked, suggesting the problem family would remain as an ongoing and intractable social problem which only reproductive limitation or segregation would solve. Their developmental 'regression' sets them apart from the movement towards social improvement through the modernization of family life, marital and parental relations, and patterns of sentiment formation. And so the children of problem families point to the limits of Blacker's eugenic approach, appearing as gaps and elisions in his argument, forming truculent and unruly disruptions to his eugenic vision of the improvement of the quality of the population.

RECOVERY AND REHABILITATION: THE MERSHAM EXPERIMENT

Blacker's objective, therefore, of developing a social psychiatry, equipped to alleviate patterns of social pathology, was not fully realised in his own programme, and his position in relation to reform eugenics and the move to positive eugenic measures is more fractured than it might seem. But Blacker's focus on the problem family also had indirect effects of a more applied kind, in ways which overcame some of the obstacles he erected in his own work. In the event, the question of the rehabilitation of children of problem families was taken up in the Mersham experiment in the reception, investigation and disposal of deprived children funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which ran alongside Blacker's involvement in research on problem families from its instigation in 1944 to its conclusion in 1950 and the completion of a follow-up study two years later. The study was conducted by Hilda Lewis, based at the Maudsley Hospital and active in the Eugenics Society.⁵² Blacker, who was Chair of the Advisory Committee, is credited by Lewis as having 'furthered the project in every way'.⁵³

The children with a background in problem families were of particular

52. Her husband Aubrey Lewis, also a colleague of Blacker's at the Maudsley and active in the Eugenics Society, was a member of the Advisory Committee.

53. Hilda Lewis, *Deprived Children: The Mersham Experiment, A Social and Clinical Study*, London, New York, Toronto, The Nuffield Foundation and Oxford University Press, 1954, pxiii.

interest to Lewis, who wrote from the position of a psychiatrist attached to the Mersham Centre. She found their parents likely to be 'shiftless, dull, psychopathic, discordant and out of work' and the children of problem families of lower intelligence, though freer from delinquency or neurosis, than the rest of the Mersham children:⁵⁴

54. *Ibid.*, p79, p84.

An impressive demonstration of the normality of many children from 'problem families' was the speed with which, after years of drift and dirt, they fell in with the more civilized way of life at the Centre. Some of the older children were surprisingly mature and responsible ... caring for their younger brothers and sisters and sometimes actually stepping into a protective, succouring role towards their feckless parents.⁵⁵

55. *Ibid.*, p80-1.

Far from supporting assumptions that an inexorable pattern of recidivist sociopathy was transmitted through such families along with mental defect, Lewis found, rather, that children from problem families had benefited by a distinctive pattern of affectionate parenting - even in the context of domestic neglect - and that this had provided them with the basis for social adaptation and a well-adjusted character. The Mersham experiment therefore offered an optimistic picture of the possibility of rehabilitation for problem family children in the context of institutional care, contradicting Blacker's assumptions regarding the effects of an environment of defective parenting on the child, and the perpetuation of a 'genetic sequence'. The children of 'unfit parents' demonstrated a precocious development of a parenting instinct guided by altruism, showing just those features of sentiment development associated with a capacity for effective parenting of the next generation.

Perhaps this explains the omission of any consideration of measures aimed at the children of problem families in Blacker's programme. For if parental affection is identified as a critical environmental factor for the child's normal development, and that feature is found to be *more* prevalent amongst problem families, it is hard to see how he can sustain his distinction between eugenically promising and problem families. Blacker's adherence to a model of inherited defect, or temperamental instability, which rendered some individuals more susceptible to developing sociopathic features, is placed under considerable pressure in the light of the Mersham findings. If his failure to build on his own updating of the relation of heredity and environment, and to promote a rehabilitative programme aimed at the children of problem families, then, is a puzzle, given his sustained and close involvement in the Mersham experiment over precisely the period that he was formulating and revising his work on this group, this may have been because to do so would have entailed dismantling the whole edifice by which problem and promising families, and the principles of his eugenic programme itself, could be identified. The C.P. Blacker who supported the Mersham experiment and provided 'invaluable' and 'wise' advice to its author is clearly further along his own route towards a social psychiatry than the C.P. Blacker who develops his Galton lecture into

a statement of eugenic intent as he brings his involvement in research on problem families to a conclusion in the same period.

But there is another reason for this oversight. For Blacker's eugenics is more firmly based in the reform of relations within the home than it is in developing a multifactorial approach to social problems, which in the case of problem families involves intervening in the care of the child. His attachment to the home as the locus for the formation of moral character as the basis of individual happiness and social improvement is shown in his invocation of Galton's original formulation of the psychological routes of the moral sentiments:

Man's moral ... character, Galton believed, had ... emerged from sentiments which bound together the primitive family and the social group. Four types of affection are distinguished: conjugal, parental, filial and social ... Parental, conjugal and filial sentiments have their 'locus' in the home: if qualities of character have, as Galton believed, their roots in these homely sentiments, then the capacity to rear happy and well-adjusted children should have commended itself to him as an acceptable standard of eugenic merit.⁵⁶

56. Blacker, *Eugenics: Galton and After*, op. cit., p322.

This is the final statement in Blacker's summative work on eugenics. And what is most surprising and revealing, in the shadow of his promotion of a 'social psychiatry', is that as it moves from Galton's own identification of familial and social 'affection' as the basis for moral character, to his own manifesto for a new eugenic vision and programme concerning the parenting of future generations, the 'social sentiment' drops away, and he includes only the familial sentiments - parental, conjugal and filial - in an interdependent unity.

Although Blacker's attention to the problem family remains most strongly defined in the moment of the *formation* of character, then, rather than in existing social patterns and forms of social affiliation, his attention to questions of character and the quality of parenting nevertheless allows him to move eugenics towards a new standard of merit, and a programme oriented towards the modernisation of concepts of parenting and family life, designed towards social improvement. The dialogues, in his work, between eugenics and psychology, though sometimes troubling, and troublesome, allowed eugenics to develop a more dispersed influence, as it became taken up by professionals working in a range of institutional contexts on questions of social behaviour and individual adaptation. His ameliorative eugenic programme, aligned with psychiatry, contributed to the development of measures relating to marriage guidance, parenting and family relations, and child development and institutional care. In a sense, then, the influence of eugenics in a moment when it became informed by developments in psychiatry, has to be determined in the fragmented influence of these 'experiments in knowledge'. This suggests that those intellectual resources he provided became dispersed in

varied, unintended and unpredictable ways.

The historical attention I have given here to the work of Blacker in this period assesses eugenics not only as a less purposeful and directive project than many evaluations assume, but one that is shot through by an indeterminacy, a hesitancy, in the terms by which it defines itself, the concepts it deploys, and the objects it addresses. Examining contingent innovations to the accumulation of cultural repertoires and their effects, helps us to unravel the specific co-ordinates whereby cultural definitions and forms of classification become legible and persuasive within particular environments and moments, and their oversights.

As the history of eugenics demonstrates, the associations between knowledges brought together by a modernising logic in this period - loose, contingent, provisional and fleeting though they may be - afforded new ways of thinking the social and its relation to private life and individual subjective formation. The resonances with our present aren't simple, for they combine a sense of the radical strangeness of the prehistory of our modern mentalities, with a creeping and uncanny sense of their echoes in our contemporary orientation. It is this tension which, to me, suggests the value of attending to those questions that so exercised those to whom the modernising of patterns of everyday living seemed to propose a path towards 'the future of civilisation', even while their greatest attention was given to those dimensions of everyday life which were, by their own account, unamenable to their proposals for securing that vision, and how this drove them to confront fractures in the most intimate spaces and practices of everyday living.

The research and writing for this article was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. I would like to thank Jo Haynes for her valuable contribution to research on eugenics.