Introductory Comments on Down's Observations

To my mind, little justification is needed for reprinting this short essay by J. L. H. Down as a "classic" in the field of mental retardation and disability studies. However, it may be useful to speculate about what type of "classic" it is. It is not that the article is one of current influence or even approval. Down's noteworthy delineation of the syndrome that now carries his name is nonetheless embedded in an approach to evolution and "degeneracy" that is blatantly racist and thoroughly discredited. The only rationale for an assessment such as that given by Scheerenberger (1983) that Down's approach "was not intended as a negative view of any given race," (p. 57) is that, indeed, Down found all other races inferior to the Caucasian club to which he happened to belong. In an essay that itself serves as an excellent introduction to Down's piece, Stephen Jay Gould (1980) pointed out that, for his time, Down was a progressive racist, if that is not an oxymoron. In the piece reprinted here, Down is, in part, arguing against some of his contemporaries by maintaining that the members of these lesser races were still human, just lower on the evolutionary ladder (the phrase, "damning with faint praise," seems designed specifically for Down's argument). Our enduring racism today is usually more subtle and systemic.

However, Down's essay is more than just a period piece of 19th century scientific racism: of interest to historians, perhaps, but of little relevance to our contemporary concerns in mental retardation. As Steven Gelb argued in his article "The Beast in Man: Degenerationism and Mental Retardation, 1900–1920" that appears in this issue of Mental Retardation, the portrayal of people with mental retardation as a "social menace," is grounded in a dehumanizing ideology that may have changed its terms (degeneracy, eugenics) over the decades but has persisted in its practices of marginalization and control down to our current era. Reprinting Down's essay, then, to appear in the same issue as Gelb's account of the larger history of degeneracy seems particularly appropriate and illustrative. It may be true that we must walk backwards into the future, facing where we have been, uncertain of where we are going. If that be true, then at least we should keep our eyes open as we stumble along.

Down's essay originally appeared in England in 1866. It is generally credited as the earliest clinical description of what he called "mongoloid idiocy," as a condition separate and distinct from cretinism. The version reprinted here was actually itself a reprint of that original essay, appearing in the Journal of Mental Science, in 1867. Down elaborated his views at much greater length in a later book entitled Mental Affections of Children and Youth (1887). The racially based terms mongoloid and mongolism that Down coined continued to be widely used well into the 1980s.—Philip Ferguson, Associate Editor

References

Observations on an Ethnic Classification of Idiots

J. Langdon H. Down

I have for some time, writes Dr. Down, had my attention directed to the possibility of making a classification of the feeble-minded, by arranging them around various ethnic standards—in other words, framing a natural system to supplement the information to be derived by an inquiry into the history of the case.

I have been able to find among the large number of idiots and imbeciles which come under my observations, both at Earlswood and
the out-patient department of the hospital, that
can be fairly referred to
one of the great divisions of the human family
other than the class from which they have
sprung. Of course, there are numerous represen-
tations of the great Caucasian family. Several
well-marked examples of the Ethiopian variety
have come under my notice, presenting the
characteristic malar bones, the prominent eyes,
the puffy lips, and retracting chin. The woolly
hair has also been present, although not always
black, nor has the skin acquired pigmented
deposit. They have been specimens of white
negroes, although of European descent.

Some arrange themselves around the Malay
variety, and present in their soft, black, curling
hair, their prominent upper jaws and capacious
mouth, types of the family which people the
South Sea Islands. Nor have there been want-
ing the analogues of the people who, with short-
ened foreheads, prominent cheeks, deep-set
eyes, and slightly apish nose, originally inhab-
ited the American Continent.

The great Mongolian family has numerous
representatives, and it is to this division I wish,
in this paper, to call special attention. A very
large number of congenital idiots are typical
Mongols. So marked in this, that when placed
side by side, it is difficult to believe that the
specimens compared are not children of the
same parents.

The number of idiots who arrange them-
selves around the Mongolian type is so great,
and they present such a close resemblance to
one another in mental power, that I shall de-
scribe an idiot member of this racial division,
selected from the large number that have fallen
under my observation:

The hair is not black, as in the real Mongol,
but a brownish colour, straight and scanty. The
face is flat and broad, and destitute of prominence.
The cheeks are roundish, and extended laterally.
The eyes are obliquely placed, and the internal
canthi more than normally distant from one an-
other. The palpebral fissure is very narrow. The
forehead is wrinkled transversely, from the con-
stant assistance which the levatores pebrarum
derive from the occipito-frontalis muscle in the
opening of the eyes. The lips are large and thick,
with transverse fissures. The tongue is long, thick
and is much roughened. The nose is small. The
skin has a slight dirty-yellowish tinge, and is defi-
cient in elasticity, giving the appearance of being
too large of the body.

The boy's aspect is such, that it is difficult to
realize that he is the child of Europeans; but so
frequently are these characters presented, that
there can be no doubt that these ethnic fea-
tures are the result of degeneration.

The Mongolian type of idiocy occurs in
more than 10 per cent of the cases which are
presented to me. They are always congenital
idiots, and never result from accidents after uter-
ine life. They are, for the most part, instances of
degeneracy arising from tuberculosis in the
parents. They are cases which very much repay
judicious treatment. They require highly
azotized food, with a considerable amount of
oleaginous material. They have considerable
power of imitation, even bordering on being
mimics. They are humorous, and a lively sense of
the ridiculous often colour their mimicry.
This faculty of imitation may be cultivated to a
very great extent, and a practical direction
given to the results obtained. They are usually
able to speak; the speech is thick and indistinct,
but may be improved very greatly by a well-di-
rected scheme of tongue gymnastics. The coor-
dinating faculty is abnormal, but not so
defective that it cannot be greatly strengthened.
By systematic training, considerable manipula-
tive power may be obtained.

The circulation is feeble; and whatever ad-
vance is made intellectually in the summer,
some amount of retrogression may be expected
in the winter. The mental and physical capa-
bilities are, in fact, directly as the temperature.

The improvement which training effects in
them is greatly in excess of what would be predi-
cated if one did know the characteristics of the
type. The life expectancy, however, is far be-
low the average, and the tendency is to the tu-
berculosis which I believe to be the hereditary
origin of the degeneracy.

Apart from the practical bearing of this at-
tempt at the ethnic classification, considerable
philosophical interests attaches to it. The ten-
dency in the present day is to reject the opini-
on that the various races are merely varieties
of the human family having a common origin,
and to insist that climatic or other influences
are sufficient to account for the different types
of man. Here, however, we have examples of
retrogression, or at all events, of departure from
one type and the assumption of the characteris-
tics of another.

If these great racial divisions are fixed and
definite, how comes it that disease is able to
break down the barrier, and to stimulate so
closely the features of the members of another division? I cannot but think that the observations which I have recorded are indications that the difference in the races are not specific, but variable. These examples of the result of degeneracy among the mankind appear to me to furnish some argument in favour of the unity of the human species.