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Challenging the Therapeutic Narrative: Historical and Clinical Perspectives on the Genetics of Behavior

Review by: Aldric Hama Author of the Book: Robert G. Goldstein*

Robert Goldstein, clinical instructor in psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College, offers an expansive view of the innateness of human behavioural traits through the lens of history, literature, sociobiology, and biomedical science. Goldstein not only lucidly explains that human mental traits and mental illness are genetically based, but goes on to chastise those still espousing the so-called "narrative" or "biographical" approach to entirely explain behaviour and mental illness. As Goldstein points out, "although Freud is long dead and buried", psychiatrists still insist on the "formative impact of early experience" (p. 2) to explain behaviour and mental illness (Lewis, 2014). Diagnosis of mental illness has evolved but not by much, from now "dead and buried" Freudian "blocked libidos" and "incestuous fantasies" to today's plausible sounding yet empirically limited "inadequate attachment during childhood" (Jewell et al., 2019) (p. 2).

With respect to diagnosis, based on his placement of the heritability of traits as the focal point, Goldstein suggests a dimensional approach to describe the origin of mental illness. The "therapeutic narrative" or "narrative therapy", also known as "talk therapy" or "story telling", claims that "early experiences and relationships shape behavioral responses exhibited throughout life and that there is therapeutic utility in attempting to trace how these experiences sculpt one's behaviors and pathologies" (p. 9). The "therapeutic narrative" reveals itself as "guided introspection", with "the goal of formulating etiological, biographical accounts of behavioral patterns" (p. 9). The narrative approach has been utilized to explain behaviour of, for example, violent criminals. One is constantly told by the intellectual elite and mainstream media that it is "common sense" that juvenile and adult criminals are products of childhood abuse and poverty. Alternate non-environmental explanations for criminal behaviour, such as defects in executive functioning, including intelligence and self-control, both of which are heritable, have yet to be openly acknowledged (e.g., on-going hostility to Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve*).[1]

Goldstein spends considerable effort explaining the persistent attractiveness of the flawed "narrative therapy" approach to psychiatrists and the general public. Both groups share the human tendency to "read coherence in seemingly related variables" (p. 16), to complete a "common sense" story based on incomplete or inaccurate information, perhaps even based on wishful thinking. For example, early agricultural humans have ascribed crop failure to a god's wrath, as "some transgression. . . must have occurred." One could speculate on the numerous events that could have upset the gods enough to evoke a crop failure. In any event, the supernatural explains crop failure. There is also a human tendency to ascribe "purpose", a "certain instrumentality" (p. 26), to behavioural traits as well as to mental illness. There are those who view mental illnesses as "coping" mechanisms caused by inadequate childhood attachment while others shrug and label them as "God's will". In fact, Goldstein points out that relying on a cause-and-effect model to explain adult mental illness is problematic, as "the systems underlying behavior are not structured to discursive, commonsense rules" (p. 3).

Keeping one's "common sense" stories to oneself harms only the bearer. However, humans do have a tendency, as Goldstein points out, "to convince others of the validity" of one's self-deception (p. 29). Indeed, because of this human trait, Freudians "elaborated the causality-reading tendency into a therapeutic worldview that fundamentally shifted the way behavior was understood for generations" (p. 31).

In contrast to the modern Freudian construct of mental illness, Goldstein notes that cultures worldwide clearly saw mental pathologies and ill temperament, as well as physical traits, existing within some families

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[1] https://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/voices/the-real-problem-with-charles-murray-and-the-bell-curve/

and not in others and that some traits are passed on to subsequent generations. This line of thinking existed well before the formal study of genetics. Indeed, the age-old custom of arranged marriages as practiced in numerous cultures, with the goal of keeping heritable pathologies out as well as retaining wealth, could be viewed as "the world's oldest and most common eugenic practice" (p. 43). As an example, Goldstein notes the value Hasidic Jews place on good breeding. A Hasidic mother of a young female patient asked Goldstein whether it was better for her daughter to marry a suitor with a neurological defect or a physical deformity. As a practicing psychiatrist but not a matchmaker, Goldstein suggested to the concerned mother: "Ask the Rabbi" (p. 19).

Equally enlightening are chapters on the history of the "nativists", those who view behavioural traits as mainly genetic in origin rather than acquired entirely through learning or training. These nativists include the familiar, such as Charles Darwin and his cousin Francis Galton. Goldstein notes that early 20th-century non-scientists took the nativist view of human behaviour, such as novelist George Bernard Shaw. Goldstein takes a chapter to delve into realist novelist Honoré de Balzac as a "crypto-nativist", offering copious examples of Balzac's view of human behaviour, particularly addiction, from his work as well as from his personal life. Balzac's fictional characters recognized "the inborn and inflexible nature of behavior" (p. 49). Goldstein describes Balzac's compulsive shopping, impulsive financial speculation and serial womanizing and notes Balzac's "explicit portrayal" of addiction in his novels. We read that Balzac's father also had self-control problems and that Balzac recognized that he had inherited his father's addiction-prone personality.

Today, default thinking is that nativists are on the right of the political spectrum. In addition to Shaw, a Fabian socialist, Goldstein could have listed other prominent leftists such as Shaw's contemporary and fellow Fabian H.G. Wells and birth control activist Margaret Sanger as within the nativist spectrum (Paul, 1984). Interestingly, geneticist J.B.S. Haldane, a "Marxist", is presented in the book as an opponent of nativism, based on his attack on ethologist Konrad Lorenz's black-and-white conception of behaviour as either all instinctive or all environmentally acquired. However, Haldane has expressed his tempered view that behavioural traits are heritable while not entirely dismissing a role for an effect of environment (Haldane, 1938).

Goldstein's book is thin but heavy in insights. Of particular interest is his description of the historical explanations for behavioural traits: from innate and heritable in earlier times to the Freudian era explaining behaviour as an outcome of both conscious sexual desire and unconscious deviance, then back again to behavioural traits as genetically-mediated with a still unknown or unquantifiable contribution of environmental factors on behaviour (Runze et al., 2024). Given the eclectic blend of essays, from historical debates on the nature of human behaviour and mental illness to an illuminating biography of one of France's renowned authors, Goldstein's book should be read by every student of behavioural genetics as well as by psychiatry students.

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