

Irv Gottesman and the Possibilities for Theoretical Clinical Psychology

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I first met Irv Gottesman while I was a grad student in Austin in 1985. He was consulting on a psychopathology text my mentors Lee Willerman and David Cohen (both also gone; thank heaven for the indomitable John Loehlin) were writing. I didn't know it at the time, but an employment deal was being negotiated, so I was assigned to lead the small group of graduate students who took Irv out to dinner. I had only recently embarked on a dissertation in behavior genetics and had no practice in academic small talk. We all sat down, regarded each other uncomfortably—what to talk about? Irv cleared his throat, looked at me. “Guess how old I am,” he said. (To my naive eyes he seemed old, though he was about 50, 12 years younger than I am now. But I must have stammered out something reasonably diplomatic, because several weeks later Willerman called me down to his office and said, “Guess what, you're going to the University of Virginia.” No one should miss the old-school system of academic recruiting.)

Anyway, that was Irv Gottesman. Not given to easy social graces, he used his mild but chronic unease to provoke you a little, to stretch you beyond your comfortable limits. Once the deal was done and I headed off to Charlottesville, my slow education and trial by fire continued. He would call on me in colloquia—“Uhm, I think Eric might have a question he would like to ask here.” He would assign me reading. Particularly, as was often the case, when I disagreed with him, I would find a stack of readings in my mailbox the next day, with a note saying, “This is the material I would expect you to master if you are going to discuss this point.”

Irv's greatest professional influence on me was as a theoretical psychologist. As important as his early twin work on the genetics of schizophrenia was, his most lasting contributions, even in schizophrenia, were as a theoretician. His insistence on the radically polygenic transmission of schizophrenia was courageous, groundbreaking, and has turned out to be no less than prophetic. His exposition of the endophenotype concept has

been hugely influential. It may sometimes be forgotten, however, that Irv's theoretical contributions extend well beyond schizophrenia and psychopathology. His dissertation was about the genetics of personality, and the work he conducted laid the foundation for everything that followed for the next half-century.

Even more important were the searching and wide-ranging essays he wrote about the broadest implications of behavior genetics for the scientific conduct of psychology and its implications for social organizations and individual humans. My favorite is, “The Biogenetics of Race and Class” (Gottesman, 1968), which despite the mid-century ring of its title, was a sweeping and forward-looking consideration of philosophical and empirical consequences of the then-new realization that genetic variance is ubiquitous in psychology. Like all of Gottesman's theoretical work, it was extraordinary in its depth and breadth of coverage of the empirical literature, in its meticulous attention to detail. Even more remarkable was its anticipation of the field's ongoing philosophical obsessions, unresolved to this day: the relationship between cultural and biological evolution, the tensions between individual differences and social justice, and unavoidably (20 years before *The Bell Curve*), race and class.

The contrast between Irv's work and the likes of *The Bell Curve* exemplifies his most important legacy to me. So many of the great 20th-century figures in the theory of human individual differences, like Burt, Eysenck, Cattell, and Jensen, followed their new empirical knowledge of human individual differences and genetic variability backwards, into illiberal 19th-century notions of genetic determinism, social Darwinism, and racism. The view that a realistic understanding of genetic differences among people should lead one in the direction of regressive social

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policy remains widely held to this day. Other theorists, like Lewontin and Gould, protected their progressive philosophical instincts by denying the very existence of basic individual difference constructs like intelligence and by talking around the plain fact that individual differences are transmitted along genetic pathways in human families.

Irv showed that a deep understanding of the role of genetics in human affairs was perfectly compatible with a progressive construction of social justice and human potential. He was implacably opposed to racism in any form and would not tolerate it even in thinkers he otherwise admired. He was particularly proud of his testimony before the U.S. Congress in 1972 on the subjects of genetics, race, and educational equality. He was certainly the most prominent behavior geneticist to refuse to sign the letter (not racist, but rock-ribbed conservative in outlook) from mainstream behavior geneticists and intelligence theorists published in *The Wall Street Journal* (Gottfredson, 1997). He was a clear-eyed historian of the role played by psychiatric genetics in the Nazi atrocities. He opposed the Pioneer Fund, a research foundation originated by American Nazi sympathizers, even as many of his colleagues took money from it. He was open-minded and generous in his broad outlook on psychology, with interests extending beyond schizophrenia to intelligence, personality, and child development. He was an admirer of Freud and a believer in psychotherapy.

Irv was the leading figure among the second-generation Meehlans who brought the Minnesota school of clinical psychology—rooted in psychometrics, individual

differences, behavior genetics, and the philosophy of science—to the wider American academe. He showed me that it was possible to be a successful scientific clinical psychologist without running a lab in the traditional sense. By the time he arrived at UVa, still in midcareer, Irv was not collecting a lot of new data. He was collaborating, synthesizing, commenting, and theorizing. That he could do so at such a thoroughgoing level of genetic realism without ever once lapsing into scientifically simplistic or politically regressive thinking will be the most lasting testament to the generosity of his scientific spirit. I can hope to do little more than pay forward one small part of that legacy.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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