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***Eugenics, Prejudice, and Human Development Revisited:
The Role of Structural Racism***

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1 In his provocative article “Eugenics, prejudice, and psychological research,” Turiel (2020, p.
2 106) raises the important question: “What does the eugenics movement of the early twentieth
3 century tell us about present times?” Turiel argues that much theory and research has
4 supported the eugenics movement and he highlights the importance of considering
5 layperson’s thinking on these issues. Drawing on Piaget’s work, Turiel notes that thinking is
6 not always correct and highlights the importance of examining the reasoning individuals have
7 for thinking as they do. In his words: “In order to better understand prejudice, discrimination,
8 and segregation, it is important to also study the thinking that goes into current features of
9 eugenics” (Turiel, 2020, p. 106). Furthermore, he argues for the “pressing need to study the
10 psychological thinking underlying eugenics, as well as its impact on individuals and
11 societies.” (Turiel, 2020, p. 107). We applaud such work and the continued efforts of *Human*
12 *Development* to provide a platform for this important scholarship (see also, Killen & Ruck’s
13 special issue on *Promoting Social Equity, Fairness, and Racial Justice in Development*,
14 2021). In this article, we suggest that research investigating individuals’ thinking about
15 prejudice and related themes should be augmented by explicit consideration of products
16 beyond individual thinking. Human action is intricately tied to larger cultural and political
17 systems and structures that promote racial and other forms of oppression. To expand on
18 Turiel’s suggestions about the eugenics movement for modern times, we draw on the history
19 of the eugenics movement at the turn of the century in America. By doing so, we can better
20 understand how the eugenics movement has influenced contemporary attitudes and practices
21 complemented by sociocultural and political contexts in which individual thinking and
22 developmental scholarship occur.

23

24 The Case of G. Stanley Hall and the Eugenics Movement

25 We recently read Turiel’s article in a graduate seminar on theories of development at Clark
26 University in the week we were considering G. Stanley Hall’s views on human development.
27 Hall has been praised for his intellectual courage and his central leadership role in
28 establishing developmental psychology as a prominent field within psychology (Hogan, 2003;
29 Thompson, Hogan, & Clark, 2012). While a trailblazer on many issues, Hall’s views on
30 human development are racist (Hogan, 2003; Ross, 1972) and have been denounced (Division
31 7 APA, 2022). Clearly Hall was capable of going against conventional ways of thinking of his
32 time, offering many pioneering ways to think about psychological science. Nevertheless, we
33 struggled to understand his views on eugenics, especially because, on the one hand, he
34 showed unconventional support of minorities, and on the other hand, his publications
35 represent otherwise.

36

37 When considering G. Stanley Hall and his work on eugenics, we found ourselves with further
38 questions. There seemed to be a disconnect between what he believed and stood for in his
39 actions as a person and builder of modern-day developmental science in America and the
40 content of his scientific writings, specifically around the topic of eugenics. We poured over
41 materials from his files in Clark University’s archive with the goal of beginning to unravel
42 how a person whose perspective has been described as a racist, also could be described as
43 acting in ways that contradicted this. As we worked through writings about Hall, including a
44 rich intellectual biography (Ross, 1972), Wilson’s (1914) personal biography of G. Stanley
45 Hall, and unpublished archival letters and manuscripts, several contradictions in his
46 theoretical perspective and actions became apparent. He espoused racist scientific beliefs, yet

47 simultaneously deviated from the norm in his everyday actions. He was known for his liberal
48 beliefs and has been credited with responsibility for Clark admitting more Black students than
49 other colleges and universities of his time (Guthrie, 2004). In addition, he was the mentor of
50 Francis Sumner, known as the “father of Black psychology” and as the first African-American
51 to receive a doctorate in psychology in the United States. In addition to supporting other
52 marginalized groups, Hall also actively recruited Black students from Historically Black
53 Colleges and Universities (HBCU) at a time when other institutions did not. Several accounts
54 point out the mutual respect Sumner and Hall had for one another, as well as Hall’s efforts to
55 allow students of all races to develop their own voices (Ross, 1972; Wilson, 1914).

56

57 Resolving these seeming contradictions brings us to the heart of our desire to continue the
58 dialogue and recommendations made by Turiel (2020). To do so involves consideration of
59 Hall’s writings as contextualized within the social and political environment of American
60 developmental psychology, the social and behavioral sciences in general, and the eugenics
61 movement in the US and globally. While our discussion has focused on G. Stanley Hall, it is
62 important to recognize that he is just one of the many psychologists, university academics,
63 and university presidents who supported the eugenics movement through his work. When
64 Galton coined the term “eugenics” in 1893, it was not imagined that its impact on science
65 would be so significant. However, the reach of eugenics extended far beyond a scientific
66 concept by the 1920s. After that, it began to be considered an intellectual and social-political
67 movement. At the time Hall was writing, there were coordinated efforts towards a “eugenics
68 agenda” with strong backing in both political and scientific communities. Central here is that
69 the movement proceeded at both the level of laypersons and scientific communities, and this
70 movement proceeded to gain support in scientific and governmental establishments around
71 the globe (Farber, 2008).

72

73 Full Circle: Eugenics and Implications for Modern Developmental Training and Scholarship
74 Following Gould’s (1996) point about research in general, developmental scholarship cannot
75 be disentangled from the sociocultural and political context within which it is carried out. G.
76 Stanley Hall’s work, while increasingly questioned by some psychologists of his time,
77 nevertheless fits well with broader disciplinary claims made in the sciences and social
78 sciences, especially pertaining to the field of genetics, where political and economic belief
79 systems and structures encouraged the validation of folk beliefs. Furthermore, while some
80 developmental scholars were turning away from such beliefs, those deeply involved and,
81 importantly, in power to act on Hall’s ambitious goals pertaining to the connection between
82 research and practice were very much involved in this movement. We will never know what
83 guided Hall’s research and what motivated a complex bifurcation between his scholarly
84 writings and actions. These do not excuse or condone his beliefs but rather help us learn from
85 them.

86

87 To eradicate folk beliefs about eugenics, we must follow Turiel’s important suggestion that
88 we study individuals’ developing understanding of prejudice in ways that will help us change
89 layperson’s folk knowledge. In addition, we believe it is essential to recognize the structural
90 factors that influenced scholarship, including issues of power. For example, who participates
91 in psychological research? Is research from around the globe equally accessible to all? How
92 do political connections and networks play a role in research and its reach? To this extent,

93 views endorsing eugenics are not only products of individual mindsets, but also can directly
94 be linked to broader sociocultural and political movements beyond the level of the individual
95 and even outside the discipline. This highlights the critical importance and the need to
96 interrogate the ecosystem within which developmental science takes place, examining
97 systemic racism and oppression that existed in the academy during Hall's time, and also
98 continues today (Wilder, 2013). Moreover, as we know, these structural areas have not only
99 been tied to universities, but also other organizations beyond the academy, whether in
100 publishing, societies, or governmental support for research around the globe.

101
102 Steps have begun to be taken by the field of developmental science to denounce eugenic
103 views. In 2022, Division 7 of the APA removed Hall's name from its senior scholar award to
104 signal to the field that Hall's writings on eugenics are not representative of the field's goals to
105 eradicate systemic racism and strive for social justice. Furthermore, the decision was noted
106 not to be a personal judgment, but meant to highlight the lack of alignment with current views
107 and values. This is an important step that we believe needs to be pushed even further at this
108 juncture where academic freedom is at stake. In addition to the kind of research striving to
109 understand individual functioning of the sort outlined by Turiel, at this current political time,
110 it is essential to consider whether and how the field is set up structurally to actively contribute
111 to fulfilling the dream of eradicating systemic racism and oppression. The field must learn
112 from its past and not treat individual findings as isolated, or the consequence of idiosyncratic
113 scientists, any more than racist thinking is the product of faulty thinking in individuals. At a
114 time when racism is a ubiquitous feature of society, the field must question what structural
115 processes and procedures are in place as we work toward social justice.

116
117 We conclude with two recommendations for developmental science in addition to Turiel's
118 pleas for more research. First, we emphasize the need to discuss the nuanced relationship
119 between sociocultural and political movements as students are educated about the field of
120 developmental science. For example, issues of systemic racism and other systems of
121 oppression typically are omitted in course readings and discussions in higher education
122 institutions. This has been noted in the US (see Guthrie, 1998) but exists globally.
123 Furthermore, developmental leaders around the globe need to ensure that robust processes and
124 procedures are in place to dismantle racism and oppression, especially as new voices enter the
125 field. This suggests the important role that publishers, journal editors, and societies all play,
126 not only assuring diverse representation at the table but also that structures are in place so that
127 we learn from this wider range of voices. To this extent then, the vitality and excellence of
128 our field depends on cutting-edge scholarship aimed at understanding the development of
129 prejudice, discrimination and morality in children and youth, as well as setting up structures
130 and processes that assure diversity, equity, and inclusion as we passionately study and
131 produce scholarship on human development today.

132

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137

138 **Conflict of Interest Statement**

139 The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

140 **Author Contributions**

141 This paper stems from discussion in a graduate seminar on developmental theories taught by
142 the first author and held at Clark University in the Fall of 2022. While the first author drafted
143 the text and played a central role in outlining the argument, all participants critically discussed
144 and evaluated the ideas presented, analyzed primary materials in the archive, and played a
145 central role in editing the manuscript. The student authors are listed in alphabetical order.

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