Session 3: Objects and Stories from The Galton Collection

Presented by the Collection’s curator, Subhadra Das.

How we made this: For the Troubling Legacies/Fractured Futures event in March 2019 our invited speaker Subhadra Das (curator of The Galton Collection at UCL) presented objects from the collection and gave a fantastic talk. Unfortunately the audio recording didn’t work. So, after the event I asked seminar participants to share any comments and reflections. I scrambled and anonymized the comments received, and pasted them alongside pictures that I’d taken on the day.

Thanks again to Subhadra and to everyone who contributed comments.

(Diane Carr, June 2019)

https://playhouse.wordpress.com/2019/01/31/troubled-legacies-fractured-futures/
https://www.lifestudy.ac.uk/museums/galton
Objects and stories from The Galton Collection
Presented by the curator
Subhadra Das

With comments from the seminar participants.

Image: A picture of Subhadra carrying items from the Collection.

Troubling Legacies/Fractured Futures research seminar and workshop, London March 14th 2019
12:00 to 4 pm. Room G 12, UCL, 22 Gordon St building (The Bartlett) Convened by D.Carr and E.Fox
For the D4D project (funded by the AHRC)
As a science teacher, I am usually very into scientific development and I get very excited when new and innovative knowledge comes out of research in genetics (e.g. gene banks, GMOs, etc.), but as a social scientist, I would be naive to go down the lane of a positivist view of this research as "objective" and "unbiased". And I think Galton's work is a great historical and cultural example of this "non-neutral" aspect of the relationship between science and society, and the presentation was certainly a great reminder of that for our contemporary engagement with genetics.

Images
Left: the cover of the Life History Album.
Right: A selection of objects from the collection.
...remarkable and unsettling was the parallel between the popularity of Galton's Anthropometric lab in the International Health Exhibition and the current trend in private "heritage" DNA tests. Both follow the same logic of "charging" the public twice, since they are collecting data from the public and receiving money for doing that. It is also quite unsettling since we do not know exactly how this data is treated, and considering the uses that the data obtained by Galton was used in late 19th century, it makes me worried about what can emerge from these DNA testing services.
Another thing that made me think about the relationship between science and society was the whole point of Galton's work on Anthropometrics and his engagement with the "lay public" and how the recent commercial use of DNA test looks terrifyingly similar. All this propaganda we get about sending a sample of your DNA to a company that will use it to track back you family tree, or even providing some public service (e.g. NHS) with it, makes me consider where we are going to get to from here. Are we seeing a new rise in something akin to eugenics (ranking of people, for instance)?
Images: The maths (bell curve) and a selection of objects.
NOTES

anthropometrics

normal humans

bell-shaped curve: measuring for single traits

mathematics of regression to the mean

cousin to Darwin (grandfather: Erasmus)

humans are animals

Galton establishes the uniqueness of fingerprints

anthropometric laboratory

...causing mixed feelings

between being positively impressed by some of the constructs/artefacts and
disgusted by the underlying ideas embedded on them and the techniques - throughout the whole of it

Image: Portraits, old documents, an object that demonstrates a ‘bell curve’
I really loved the event. It showed a huge 'elephant in the room' of our contemporary conversations on racism and genetics, by showing how technological, cultural, and scientific developments are entangled with each other, and how complex it is to draw a boundary and take a position.
My immediate reactions were that it’s scary to think we’re still using some of these archaic tools for archaic purposes today. The head size measure for example, and bell curve. It makes me wonder about rethinking the intentions of some of these tools. Clinicians really should take stock before using these in clinic... even with all the best will in the world. I mean, growth charts... what an absolute minefield.

Image: The cover of the Life History Album which is (as one of the seminar participants pointed out) ‘the same blue as Facebook’.
Image: A tray of human eyes made of glass. Mostly blue, olive or hazel.

I would say eye opening, but my match on the eye chart was pretty much eyes-rolled dead so maybe not so eye opening (see attached for my match... bottom right no. 16.)
I found Subhadra's presentation on the Galton collection to be very illuminating. I'd only vaguely known about UCL's history in relation to eugenics. I was honestly stunned with everything, I briefly studied eugenics as a literature student in relation to some of the texts we had read...but to thoroughly learn about Galton and eugenics and to actually see some of the artefacts that he used in front of me had a really strong impact on me. I actually ended up showing my friends and family some of the pictures I took from the presentation (such as the glove and the eye/hair colour set), and they reacted in a similar manner.
Image: a selection of objects from the collection. Subhadra is showing participants pages from The Life History Album.
With these gloves you can create your own *map of beauty*.

Image: Galton’s ‘counting gloves’ on a tray, and Subhadra showing the gloves to a seminar participant.
The "counting gloves" (the ones that had a small pin in the thumb, so trained agents could use it to code people into specific categories) was also an object that impressed me by the cleverness of its design and by the disgusting uses that were given to it, especially in relation to the example given by Subhadra - the mapping of female beauty in the UK. Categorising and measuring towards the "superior standards" (taller, prettier - whatever that means) seemed to be Galton's philosopher stone, and this became clear throughout the presentation. Galton's legacy, with this perpetual search for specific standards, starts to become quite frightening when we think about the current political climates around the world...
The hair tin box. A selection of human hair – mostly beige to light brown in colour, and flat.

As I looked at the pallets of hair and eye colors, it sickened me. These were not just historical relics, these were tools that could too easily be used to catalog and kill my friends and family. As a Jew and as a disabled person I felt vulnerable.

We need to teach why these tools are still so dangerous.”
An object that, for me, summarised Galton's legacy was the "hair scale", constructed in the same way as the normal distribution in statistics, with what was considered to be "normal" (straight, fair hair) in the centre and other tones and textures being pushed to the borders. It is quite unsettling because it shows exactly the organisation of Galton's work, mixing scientific ideas and discourses to strengthen arbitrarily constructed conceptions of race...to normalise these aspects (e.g. whiteness).
I’m fine till we get to the hair. Then I’m not.

Image: The hair box, open and sitting on the table.
One thing that struck me, and I think that has a lot to do with identifying myself as a Latina, was the hair box. Most of the colours and (especially) textures in that box are so very different from my own that they brought me back to my time as a teenager in Brazil. As a colonised country, we are still so attached to ideals of beauty coming from a white, European perspective, that most of us Latina women (at least from mine and my mother's generation) grew up straightening our hairs daily (and here you have the famous "Brazilian blow Dry" and "Brazilian straightening" processes) and also dying them to "lighter colours". We have such a complex relationship with these ideals of beauty that seeing Galton's hair box reminded me of where this expected behaviour from women in my country actually comes from, that is, what's behind my mother's constant insistence in straightening my hair to any party and "special event" I had to attend when I was younger.
S and I stood for a while trying to work out what this round wooden object measured. Wrists? It turned out to be a napkin ring.

Galton collected it in Egypt. Subhadra explained it was included in the display to indicate that Galton was wealthy and well travelled.
Subhadra pointed out the historical relationship between fingerprinting and colonial oppression.

For more on this topic:
Looking back at the pictures, a few thoughts came along. I must admit I was not very familiarised with Galton’s character, nor with his connection to UCL. Firstly, I felt a strange sense of curiosity towards the different artefacts. I think the way Subhadra conducted the session was very clever. Making us guess what the artefacts were used for, making it somehow like a game, gave me a first impression of cleverness or even rationality to his thought. But once I reflect on what they actually were and how they were used with real people for such disgusting and macabre ends, it created a greater realisation of Galton’s evilness. I really enjoyed the fact that it was a group session, so we could all share our feelings and comments among us. I found particularly insightful (and scary) the comparisons between Galton’s work and the new biometric technologies that are currently being developed and used in research (eg. facial recognition AI). I think having the real artefacts in the room, added a special layer of understanding and powerfulness to the session.

Overall insightful, scary, creepy and timely. Thank you.
Images (Left) A form from the Anthropometric lab that says “Hearing: Keenness can hardly be tested here owing to the noises and echoes” (Right) – and the next line, which tests it anyway: “Highest audible note / vibrations per second”
I think having these items on display in some manner or other to the public would be beneficial in the long term, it would address the "troubled legacies" that UCL has. I think it's important to know which problematic "sciences" and what knowledge was lauded and respected in the past in order for us not to fall into the same traps.
Thanks again to Subhadra Das and to the the seminar participants.


- For more on Subhadra’s work, visit here: [http://blogs.nature.com/aviewfromthebridge/2017/12/15/bricks-mortals/](http://blogs.nature.com/aviewfromthebridge/2017/12/15/bricks-mortals/)

- Or watch Subhadra’s talk about Francis Galton and UCL

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJ4K6oxAUfc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJ4K6oxAUfc)

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For more on the D4D project

- [https://playhouse.wordpress.com/project-d4d-2016-2020/](https://playhouse.wordpress.com/project-d4d-2016-2020/)

- [http://d4d.org.uk/](http://d4d.org.uk/)

- Supported by the AHRC 2016-2020