Faculty members uncover possible identity of ‘Little Albert’, Psychology’s most famous infant research study

Edmonton—MacEwan University faculty members Nancy Digdon and Russ Powell may have unlocked the identity of Little Albert. In 1920, John Watson and Rosalie Raynor conditioned a fear of rats in a baby they called Albert B. (known now as Little Albert). By the time the study ended Albert was just over one year old, and the researchers reported that he had developed a fear of dogs and other furry animals.

In 2012, a group of American researchers led by Alan Fridland and Hal Beck announced they had uncovered new evidence that shows “Little Albert” is likely Douglass Merritte, a neurologically impaired baby who died shortly after the study. But, after reviewing the Fridlund and Beck’s article and watching Watson’s 1920 filmed footage of the study, psychology faculty members Digdon and Powell began their own research and discovered inconsistencies in Fridlund and Beck’s arguments.

“Early on we began to see these little inconsistencies,” says Powell. “We noticed a disconnect between medical records that Merritte was physically ill and the film footage of what appears to be a robust and healthy infant,” added Powell. After contacting noted Watson scholar Ben Harris (now a co-author on their paper) they began addressing the earlier paper’s inconsistencies and they discovered a better candidate for Little Albert.

Looking into the backgrounds and family history of the three possible mothers of the baby, Powell and Digdon narrowed their search efforts to Pearl Barger, and they discovered that she had three children, one of whom was named Albert. After pouring over census records they turned to Christopher Smithson, a genealogical researcher in Baltimore, who was able to find a marriage license for Pearl Barger to Charles Martin, and a birth registry for a baby that was born in March 1919. That baby’s age, like Merritte’s, matched that of the baby recorded in Watson’s research. With Harris’s help, additional research eventually led to the conclusion that Albert Barger was a much stronger candidate than Douglas Merritt to have been the real Little Albert.

Barger’s niece noted that her uncle, who died in 2007, disliked animals, especially dogs – which was one of the animals in the study – though it’s impossible to say if this was actually the result of the research.

Follow this link to an article about Powell and Digdon’s research, published on The Chronicle of Higher Education website:
http://chronicle.com/article/The-Search-for-Psychologys/146747/

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