

Eugenics in the United States

Eugenics is loosely defined as the attempt to enhance society and eliminate problems through selective breeding. The exact definition however is debated. Some scientists do not believe that the word has negative connotations. They believe the definition includes all pre-natal genetic testing that result in selection of fetuses with particular characteristics. Others however believe that the definition is much more specific in that it has to do with *coercing* people to enhance the gene structure of the population through specified breeding. In the late 1800's scientists believed that the advancements in science gave them good reason to practice eugenics. However, now the United States is generally against the mass sterilization of people with undesired traits. Despite the current negative connotations of the word eugenics many fear that the once accepted values of creating a perfect society are reappearing through genetic testing.

There are two types of eugenics: positive and negative. Positive eugenics tries to create an improved society by encouraging those who are considered to possess the best characteristics such as intelligence, wealth, and high-class manners to have more children. On the other hand, negative eugenics discourages those who have undesired traits, like mental retardation or criminal tendencies, to have children by restricting marriages and sterilizing them. In 19th century Britain Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, coined the word eugenics while studying family trees and examining the traits

that repeatedly occurred from one generation to the next. His conclusions were that both physical and psychological characteristics were inherited (Rodgers.)

This was the beginning of eugenics. Unfortunately it was not too difficult to convince the public of the "benefits" to controlling the traits of individuals entering society. The main reasons were that it is advantageous to everyone to create a society of well-breed individuals and that economically it would be easier and more beneficial for the society as a whole.

Beginning in 1890 the United States joined the idea of eugenics when Connecticut prohibited "epileptics, imbeciles, and feebleminded persons from marrying or having extramarital relations before age forty-five (Rodgers.)" At that time there were no sterilization laws. However, many states were sterilizing people in both criminal and mental institutions on a regular basis. Then, in 1907 Indiana was the first state to pass a law that permitted the sterilization of people with unwanted traits such as criminals, rapists, imbeciles, and idiots. By 1927, twenty-seven states had statutes permitting compulsory sterilization of certain categories of people such as those considered to be feebleminded or habitual criminals. It is estimated that by 1941 at least 36,000 sterilizations had occurred in the United States (Mawer.) Finally, in 1979 Virginia removed the last of its eugenics legislation from state law. Out of approximately 60,000 total sterilizations committed in the United States, Virginia had performed about 7, 450 between 1927 and 1979(Associated Press.) None of the 30 states that had eugenics sterilizations policies had apologized for their actions until, on the 75th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's Buck v. Bell decision, that upheld Virginia's eugenics sterilization

law, Governor Mark R. Warner issued a formal apology on May 23, 2002 for the state's sterilizations.

Currently there are ten states with involuntary sterilization statutes. Some state laws are very general such as, in Idaho sterilization is allowed on those past the age of puberty, Mississippi allows both adults and minors to be sterilized on the condition that they are already institutionalized, and North Carolina simply requires the probability that the potential parent is unfit to raise a child. While Oregon's law is very specific in order to avoid infringing upon its citizens' fourteenth amendment rights. Requirements to perform an involuntary sterilization include proof that the potential parent is both able and likely to reproduce, less drastic birth control methods must be proven to have not worked, the procedure must not be likely to inflict unnecessary damage to the person, and the individual must be permanently incapable of raising children even with reasonable help. These states contend that their laws are in the best interests of the individuals being sterilized and that if these people were capable of making sound judgements they would make the same decision not to have children. The laws are not meant to simply be what is easiest for society to deal with.

The discovery of the human has been accompanied by fears that eugenics will once again move out of control. Advancements in genetic research are leading to exciting and novel ideas in healthcare. Many scientists are optimistic that these new experiments in gene therapy will soon lead to cures for genetic disorders such as cystic fibrosis, drug companies are using genetic codes to create less expensive and more effective medications, and new-borns are being tested for genetic disorder including

metabolic problems, that if caught early can be effectively treated. These are all widely accepted benefits of the discovery of the human genome.

However, there are fears that genetic testing brings to society. Skeptics fear that genetic testing may be used negatively to develop a society of people with the “perfect” genes, deny certain people insurance based on their genetic predispositions, or to enable employers to accept or reject certain workers based on their genetic makeup.

The technology to create a child with specific desired characteristics is available. One way to attain this goal is through germ line testing. This technology consists of inserting the desired genes into an undeveloped embryo that is then fertilized in vitro. This technology is legitimately and acceptingly used in couples that, due to genetic makeup, will or most likely will produce children with a life threatening genetic disorder. The controversy is most heated when it comes to what is referred to as positive germ line therapy. This entails enhancing the genes of an undeveloped embryo so that the resulting child will have the phenotypes desired by the parents.

One problem with this type of germ line therapy is that different people have different ideas of what the perfect genetic makeup is. One person may have grown up with a certain disability that they believe actually improved their appreciation for life. For example, a couple from the United Kingdom, who are both deaf, wanted a child that would also be deaf. So a friend of theirs, with five generations of deafness in his family, donated sperm so they could have a deaf child. Currently the couple has two children, one that is completely deaf and another that is partially deaf. The parents of these children believe deafness should be viewed as part of their culture rather than a disability.

However, critics believe it is inappropriate to intentionally bring a child into a sometimes unaccepting world with a disability.

Another problem brought about by allowing parents to decide the genotype of their child is that it may intensify discrimination. To produce a child with a specific genotype is expensive. If only wealthy people are given the opportunity to select certain characteristics of their child it could cause further differences not only with in social classes, but also ethnicities, intelligence levels, athletic capabilities, and many more human characteristics that make us distinct. Also if one sex becomes more popular than another does the balance of sexes would be jeopardized. This happened in China because when parents were told they could only have one child most parents wanted a boy and would have an abortion if their doctor told them that they were going to have a baby girl.

Despite the enthusiasm for genetic testing to help catch and treat genetic disorders early there are potential uses of genetic testing that will be deemed inappropriate by many. For example who says it is necessarily a bad thing to not resemble the “ideal American”? As long as scientists promote genetic testing as a device to increase the quality of life of individuals with genetic disorders and discourage the re-emergence of a socially accepted type of genetic discrimination technology will continue to benefit both society as a whole and the individuals within the society.

References

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