

Eugenics and Intelligence Quotient

Test:

Flawed Assumptions Leading To

Human Rights Violation and Lasting

Impact on Society

Yerim Sophia Jin

Emma Willard School

Abstract

Early in the 20th century, the eugenics movement and intelligence testing in the United States were shaped by a complex sequence of historical events and ideologies. After the immigration spike of the 1910s and 1920s, restrictive immigration laws were enacted. The Immigration Acts were primarily prompted by concerns about job competition and societal integration. Based on flawed assumptions about inheritance and intelligence, the idea of Eugenics played a significant role in enacting the Immigration Acts. The eugenics movement led to human rights violation and a lasting societal impact. This paper examines the motives of the eugenics movements, its consequences in the 19th and 20th centuries, and its lasting implications for American society.

Introduction

The 1910s and 1920s were the era with the massive immigration flow. Due to the significant number of immigrants affecting the employment of American citizens, the United

States enacted many immigration laws restricting immigration. Between 1890 and 1920, over 18 million new immigrants arrived in the United States. The main factors of

immigration were poverty, political pressure, and religious persecution. As large numbers of Europeans immigrated to the United States for greater equality and freedom from religious and ethnic discrimination, the growing eugenics movement in the United States gave rise to the belief that certain people should be restrained from immigrating to the country. The eugenics movement and intelligence testing became popular and influential in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, based on misconceptions that led to widespread and permanent human rights violations in American society. The aim of the eugenics movement is to improve society and the gene pool through selective breeding and sterilization, assuming that certain traits could be controlled through selective reproduction. Similarly, intelligence testing was used to identify individuals who were assumed to be intellectually inferior, given that eugenicists believed that intelligence was a fixed and measurable trait. This belief targeted specific groups of individuals considered to be disadvantaged, which, ironically, discriminated against immigrants again as opposed to their purpose of moving into the United States. The proponents of eugenics called for stricter immigration policies and the use of IQ testing to classify individuals who were decidedly inferior or a burden to society, which led to the application of stricter immigration policies and IQ testing to determine who is inferior. Both the eugenics movement and IQ testing were based on flawed assumptions about genetics

and race, as scientific knowledge about genetics was limited at the time, leading to significant human rights violations and lasting implications for American society. Despite being flawed, eugenics gained significant power and influence in the late 1910s and early 1920s because of the concern about radicalism, scientific advancement, xenophobia and nativism, the first world war, and massive immigration. In an era with significant changes in the world, people needed certainty and control to seek stability and a predictable future.

Cause of Eugenics Movement

The Eugenic movement and IQ testing were based on considerably mistaken assumptions due to the shortage of scientific knowledge. One of the primary flaws of the eugenics movement was its assumption that certain physical and mental traits could be passed down through generations. Eugenicists believed that certain traits, such as intelligence, were largely inherited and could be controlled through selective reproduction. In the early stage of genetic field development, individuals were excited about applying the idea to the human population. During the progressive era, university educated scientists focused on applying scientific knowledge into reform policies and social reformation. Eugenics was part of social reform with the application of science. With the support of professionals, eugenics gained more power and influence, which led to the continuous misunderstanding

that traits such as intelligence are determined through genetics without the influence of the environment. This idea was rooted in the work of Francis Galton, a British scientist who coined the term “eugenics” in the late 19th century. Galton argued that society could be improved by promoting the reproduction of “fit” individuals and discouraging the reproduction of incompetent individuals. Based on the eugenics idea, in the article “Psychologists and the War: The Meaning of Intelligence in the Alpha and Beta Tests,” Joel H. Spring suggests intelligence testing as the manner of perceiving individuals as less or more fit for reproduction. However, as Reddy (2008) argues, the scientific expertise about genetics was restricted at the time, and there was no clear evidence to support the idea that intelligence was a hereditary trait. In fact, intelligence is a complicated trait this is prompted by many factors, together with environmental elements consisting of education and upbringing.

Furthermore, the eugenics movement was flawed by the belief that certain races and ethnic groups were inherently inferior. Madison Grant, author of the widely praised book *The Passing of the Great Race*, (1918) argued that the white race was superior to all other races and that the “degeneration” of the white race would lead to the decline of civilization. Eugenics was an extension of the “Social Darwinism,” the belief that human society should be structured in a way that allowed the fittest individuals to survive and prosper, while

weaker individuals should be left to fail, emphasizing the genetic superiority of certain races and the need to prevent unfit individuals from reproducing. In 1910, the sense of white supremacy was pervasive and powerful. This debate intensified in the 1910s and 1920s due to significant shifts in the world through revolutions and wars, fueling general hostility towards immigrants, leading to the ever more restrictive Immigration Acts. The belief in the superiority of the white race was used to justify racist policies such as the Page Act and the Immigration Act of 1924, which restricted immigration from certain countries and promoted the idea of “racial purity.” However, as Field (1911) pointed out, there was no scientific evidence to support the idea that race was a hereditary trait, and the concept of race was largely a social construct.

Violence of Human Rights

These flawed assumptions led to violence of human rights. The eugenics movement and IQ testing had important consequences for immigration policy in the United States. The implementation of literacy tests and the quota system discriminated against certain groups based on perceptions of their intelligence and ability to assimilate into American culture. Madison Grant, a prominent eugenicist, argued that the Nordic race was superior to other races and that immigration from certain countries should be restricted to preserve the “purity” of the American gene pool (1918). These social pressures on Eugenics, connected to political

fears, especially in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, influenced the governmental decision on immigration acts, given that the group that eugenics showed inferiority was also associated with political extremism (anarchism, socialism, communism). One specific example of social pressure impacting governmental decisions related to eugenics is the Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act. This act, passed during a time of heightened anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States, restricted the number of immigrants allowed to enter the country and established quotas based on national origin. Proponents of eugenics argued that it is necessary for immigrants older than 16 to pass the literacy test in order to enter the country. They believed that continuing to allow large numbers of immigrants from these groups would lead to a decline in the overall quality of the gene pool in the United States. As a result, the Immigration Act of 1924 established quotas based on national origin that heavily favored immigrants from northern and western Europe, while severely restricting immigration from southern and eastern Europe, as well as Asia. The immigration acts violated fundamental human rights. The act effectively banned immigration from Asia, specifically China and Japan, and imposed strict quotas on immigration from other regions, including Europe. This policy was based on eugenic beliefs that certain races and nationalities were inherently inferior and would weaken the

American gene pool and fear that certain immigrants were more susceptible to political radicalism such as anarchism, socialism, Bolshevism, and communism, especially in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. This eugenic pseudo science was also fueled in these years by massive amounts of data gathered through the mobilization of millions of American men for military service during WWI. The intelligence test was conducted to identify the potential of soldiers' fitness and assign each soldier to appropriate roles. The Army Alpha and Beta tests identified soldiers with low intelligence scores and those who cannot read or write English. Unsurprisingly, immigrants tend to score lower on these tests, and eugenicists used these test results to argue the inferiority of immigrants. However, the questions and tasks were based on a specific cultural and educational background, which disadvantaged individuals from different socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds. The limited understanding of science, flawed assumptions, and biased tests consequently made immigrants inferior. Calvin Coolidge, in the First Message to Congress, claimed, "It is necessary to continue a policy of restricted immigration. It would lie well to make such immigration of a selective nature with some inspection at the source, and based either on a prior census or upon the record of naturalization. ... We should find additional safety in a law requiring the immediate registration of all aliens" (1923). As such,

legislation supporters called immigrants “aliens,” implying the inferiority and danger of them. The act also allowed for the deportation of any immigrants considered unwanted, including those with physical or mental disabilities. This provision reflected the belief that people with disabilities were unfit to contribute to society and should be removed from the population.

Forced Sterilization

The eugenics movement also led to the forced sterilization of thousands of individuals, particularly those who were regarded feeble-minded or otherwise not suitable for reproduction. In the book “Eugenics, Marriage and Birth Control,” William J. Robinson argued that intelligence is largely heritable and that those with high intelligence should be encouraged to reproduce, while those with low intelligence should be prevented from reproducing. He further advocated eugenic marriage and birth control, meaning that individuals should prevent the “inferior” gene to be passed down to the offsprings. Expansion of the idea of eugenic marriage and birth control led to the sterilization enforced on certain groups considered inferior. In 1927, the Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell* upheld the constitutionality of forced sterilization, allowing states to sterilize individuals who were examined deficient without their consent. In “Eugenical Sterilization in the United States,” Harry Hamilton Laughlin justifies the forced sterilization policy by insisting how undesirable

traits, especially mental disabilities, can pose a threat to the US. This practice continued into the mid-20th century, with thousands of individuals being sterilized against their will. In the early 20th century, the better baby contest was a popular event held in the US. These contests promoted certain traits of babies such as facial features and head circumference. The “Better Baby Contest Poster, 1930 Indiana State Fair” is a propaganda that promotes the contest and implicitly conveys the image of superior white baby with huge eyes.

This way, the design of the poster highlights the significance of the superior physical traits determined by the gene and promotes the idea of rewarding the best genetic stock. The eugenics movement and IQ testing violated basic human rights and were influenced by discriminatory beliefs, leading to lasting harm and trauma for individuals and communities affected by these practices.

Long Term Impact of Eugenics on American Society

The legacy of the eugenics movement and IQ testing has had lasting implications for American society. The forced sterilization of thousands of individuals had lasting impacts on their physical and mental health, as well as their ability to have families and participate in society. One infamous case of forced sterilization is that of Carrie Buck, who was institutionalized for being feeble-minded and subsequently sterilized against her will. Buck's

case, *Buck v. Bell*, went all the way to the Supreme Court, which upheld Virginia's law allowing for forced sterilization of individuals deemed unsuitable to procreate. The decision famously declared, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough." The lasting impacts of forced sterilization are still felt today, as many individuals and their families continue to grapple with the trauma and injustice of having their reproductive rights taken away from them. The quota system, implemented as part of the eugenic immigration policy, further reinforced discrimination against certain groups. The Immigration Act of 1924 established a quota system that restricted immigration from certain countries based on the percentage of individuals from that country already residing in the United States. This system heavily favored immigrants from Northern and Western Europe, while severely limiting immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and other regions. The quota system remained in place until 1965, perpetuating decades of discriminatory immigration policy that had lasting impacts on American society.

Impact of Eugenics Outside of America

The eugenics movement and IQ testing were based on flawed assumptions about genetics and race, leading to significant human rights violations and lasting implications for American society. Initiated from the trend of university-educated scientists applying scientific knowledge such as the theory of evolution and

mental's law into the social reform, the eugenics and IQ testing expanded to the broader population. With the impact of the first World War, spread of diseases, fear of radicalism, and nativism, the growing immigration was coming to an end. The eugenics not only limited the number of new immigrants, but also caused the forced sterilization and caused the lasting discrimination and trauma. The idea of eugenics had a profound impact on not only the American society, but the global society. However, indeed, in many ways Americans were at the forefront of this movement in the years before the rise of the Nazi regime, which took

direct influence from the ideas, strategies, and "successes" of the American eugenics movement, in Germany. The expansion of the eugenics may have ended and is not widely accepted, yet still continue to impact the society. The forced sterilization of thousands of individuals and the use of discriminatory immigration policies perpetuated racist attitudes and exclusionary practices that continue to impact communities today. It is important to recognize and acknowledge the harm caused by these practices, and work towards creating a more just and equitable society for all.

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