

Background

Throughout history, people with non-normative abilities have been judged. Sometimes this judgment led to positive consequences; however, for the most part the disabled—those who lacked certain normative abilities—were judged negatively and experienced disabling treatment. Eugenics, the goal of finding ways to better human heritable abilities, is one dynamic that influences the judgment of people's abilities and the disabling consequences. The term *eugenics* was coined to refer to "the investigation under which men of a high type are produced" [1]. There are two ways that eugenics can be achieved: through increasing the frequency of so-called 'desirable' genes (known as *positive eugenics*), or decreasing the frequency of so-called 'undesirable' genes (known as *negative eugenics*).

Disabled people have been targeted by eugenic practices in the past and present. For example, in the early twentieth century, those who were considered to be 'feeble-minded' were at risk of being sexually sterilized for fear that they would produce children with similar so-called deficits [2]. Currently, the selective termination of pregnancies involving a fetus with a gene abnormality is considered eugenic by many disability rights activists and disabled people [3].

The harm experienced by disabled people is unlikely to be limited to the eugenic practices that have already been introduced. The purpose of this poster will be to introduce eugenic technologies that may be introduced in the future and what the possible impacts of these technologies will be in terms of ability expectations and disabling treatment. Additionally, the results of a survey pertaining to the future of eugenics will be presented.



Artist's rendering of an artificial womb. Image from: <http://blog.sherweb.com/7-really-cool-medical-tech-advancements-underway/>

Eugenics: The Continuing Threat to Disabled People

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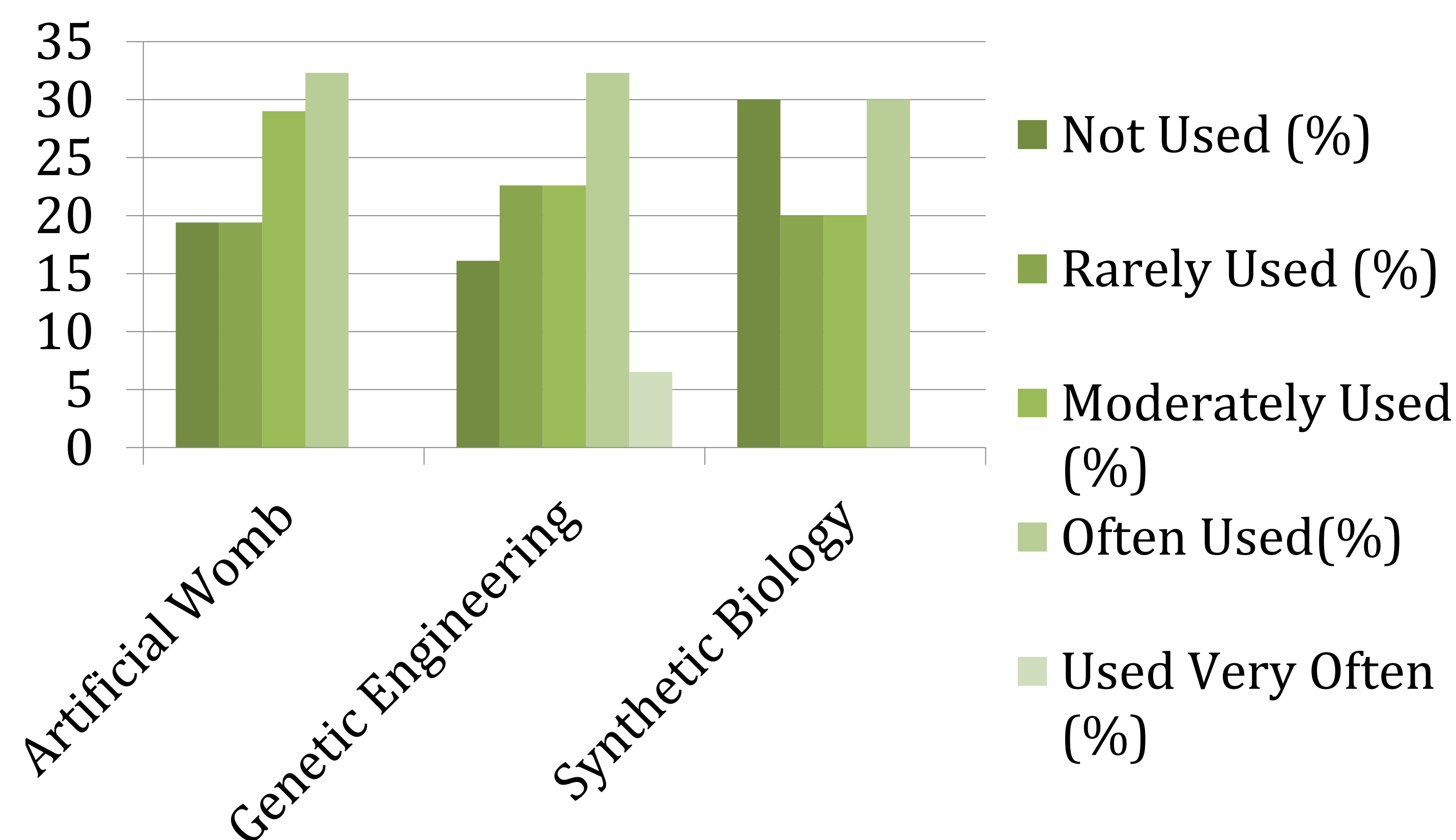


Figure 1. Responses (n=32) to the question "which of the following practices to you expect to be used in the future, and to what extent do you expect these to be used?"

Possible Future Technologies

- The artificial womb: developing a fetus outside of a female's womb in a monitored and controlled environment. This could offer life-saving technology for babies born prematurely or an alternative to surrogacy; however, it also opens up the possibility of tailoring some aspects of human development—the amount of hormones the fetus receives, what the fetus is exposed to before birth, and so forth [4].
- Genetic engineering: permanently changing aspects of a person's genetic makeup. This may be used to eradicate genetic disease, but could also be used to enhance desirable traits and eliminate undesirable traits.
- Synthetic biology: creating a person from scratch without the use of pre-existing DNA from a mother and father. This would mean synthesizing the genetic code of an individual to be developed and born in the future. Such technology would allow humans to be 'custom-made' and undesirable traits which are genetically determined would be eliminated.

Survey Methods

Forty-four (n=44) disability service workers were recruited via convenience sampling to participate in an online survey of both closed- and open-ended questions. Consent was obtained from all participants prior to completion of the survey, indicating that the participants were aware that answering any or all of the questions was strictly voluntary. Participants were permitted to skip questions without explanation.

References

- [1] Galton F.1883. *Hereditary Genius And Inquiries Into Human Faculty And Its Development*. Retrieved June 25, 2012 from: Galton.org
- [2] Stubblefield A. "Beyond the Pale": Tainted Whiteness, Cognitive Disability, and Eugenic Sterilization. *Hypatia*. 2007;22(2):162-81.
- [3] Shakespeare T. Choices and rights: eugenics, genetics and disability equality. *Disability & Society*. 1998;13(5):665-81.
- [4] Rosen C. Why not artificial wombs? *The New Atlantis A Journal of Technology and Society*. 2003;3:67-76.

Responses

- Open-ended responses to the following question: do you feel that anything can be done to change or prevent the use of eugenic aims and practices?
- Overwhelmingly, the participants thought that there was little to be done to prevent eugenics in the future, barring legislative intervention.

"This is entering into a moral issue. There will be people in favor of these practices, and people opposed. Unless laws are in place to prevent these practices, I'm sure it will go forward."

- Though participants often expressed that they were against eugenic practices, they conceded that because of society's obsession with progress and control, eugenics will likely be inevitable in the future.

"No- I believe people want to control everything - including what their offspring are like. Whether we agree that preference based on genetic makeup is right or wrong, I believe that people are going to strive to control genetics and eliminate characteristics they or society view as 'sub standard'"

Discussion

- At least 30% of participants believed that synthetic biology, genetic engineering and artificial wombs would be used often in the future (Figure 1). Participants also revealed that they did not think there would be any way to prevent eugenic practices in the future short of creating laws against them.
- If greater genetic control becomes a reality, disabled people could become even less tolerated and more marginalized than they are now. If society continues on the path towards supposed 'perfection', genetic variations will not be thought of as valuable variations, but as unacceptable defects.
- These technologies are by no means perfected or available yet; however, we submit that because of the potential impacts on disabled people, the ethical issues of eugenic practices must be discussed early on and this conversation should include people with disabilities and disability service workers.



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