

An Analysis of Eugenic Arguments: 1900-2010

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Introduction

Throughout history, people with non-normative abilities have been judged. Sometimes this judgment led to positive consequences; however, for the most part these non-normative abilities were judged negatively and the carriers of such non-normative abilities experienced disabling treatment. The term *eugenics* was coined by Sir Francis Galton in 1883 to refer to “the investigation under which men of a high type are produced” [1]. Under Galton’s vision of eugenics, 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*). Eugenics is one dynamic that influences the judgment of people’s abilities and the disabling consequences.

This poster will highlight the representations of three eugenic technologies: sexual sterilization, genetic counseling/testing, and human enhancement. Sexual sterilization is a negative eugenic practice intended to prevent the so-called ‘unfit’ from reproducing and passing on their genes to the next generation. Genetic counseling and prenatal genetic testing may be considered a negative eugenic practice, whereby fetuses that are found to have ‘undesirable’ genes or traits are selectively terminated. Human enhancement is a positive eugenic practice whereby genes are manipulated or synthesized to create ‘optimal’ genomes.

Methods

- Data sources: the New York Times, the Globe and Mail, and the Canadian Medical Association Journal
- Keywords**
 - New York Times: “sterilization AND law”, “sterilization AND bill”, “dysgenic”, “genetic counseling”, “genetic enhancement”, “human enhancement”
 - Globe and Mail: “sterilization”, “genetic counseling”, “genetic enhancement”, “human enhancement”
 - Canadian Medical Association Journal: “sterilization”, “genetic counseling”, “genetic enhancement”, “human enhancement”, “doping”
- Exclusion criteria: false hits, advertisements and articles with no discussion of the keyword were excluded from analysis
- Articles underwent in-depth thematic analysis to determine what arguments appeared *for* and *against* the use of eugenic practices

Results

	CMAJ (n=163 articles)	G & M (n=171 articles)	NYT (n=229 articles)
Prevents Suffering	10 (1919-2008)	15 (1946-2008)	24 (1909-2010)
Improving the Human Race	10 (1919-1995)	9 (1934-2007)	9 (1909-1999)
Saving Money	17 (1911-2009)	12 (1936-1997)	11 (1912-2010)
Achieving the ‘Perfect’ Human	3 (1919-1993)	10 (1950-2007)	19 (1913-2010)
Eliminating Disease	16 (1919-1996)	22 (1950-2007)	22 (1930-2010)

Table 1. Frequency of arguments in favour of sexual sterilization, genetic counseling and human enhancement. Bolded numbers represent the number of articles the argument appeared in. Date ranges in parentheses.



[2]



[3]

	CMAJ (n=163 articles)	G & M (n=171 articles)	NYT (n=229 articles)
Violates Rights	2 (1996-2009)	4 (1936-1973)	8 (1913-2007)
Causes Discrimination/is Discriminatory	13 (1955-2009)	9 (1969-2000)	15 (1942-2007)
Coercion	2 (1979-2008)	5 (1976-1999)	9 (1985-2004)
Immoral (Unspecified)	6 (1996-2007)	11 (1924-2000)	9 (1933-1993)
Insufficient Knowledge/Research	17 (1927-1996)	4 (1940-2007)	22 (1930-2010)

Table 2. Frequency of arguments against sexual sterilization, genetic counseling and human enhancement. Bolded numbers represent the number of articles the argument appeared in. Date ranges in parentheses.

Discussion

Though only a selection of arguments found in these data sources could be presented for this poster, these data show that certain eugenic arguments have persisted over time. The idea that eugenics could prevent suffering, save money, eradicate disease and help us to achieve the so-called ‘perfect’ human appeared in the early sterilization articles and continued through to today (Tables 1). Most of the arguments against eugenic technologies have remained the same—eugenics is generally immoral or unchristian, eugenics causes or perpetuates discrimination, eugenic technologies are not well enough understood to be justified, and eugenics violates the rights of those who are affected by practices such as sterilization and genetic testing (Table 2).

The arguments supporting eugenic goals of sterilization and genetic selection paint a clear picture—those who fall into the ‘unfit’ group are suffering, too expensive and ought to be ‘fixed’ or prevented. This message is obviously problematic. Such an assumption devalues the lives of people with disabilities and endangers them as many of the articles on the history of sterilization and on the use of genetic selection show. The continuous presence of the assertion that eugenics should be used to improve humans exemplifies the feeling held by some that we ought to continue to improve our genetic material and that deficiencies currently exist that should not be tolerated.

People with disabilities were never part of the sterilization discourse with eugenic goals when it was topical and one could say people with disabilities were late to the party around the discourse of genetic testing for eugenic purposes. Presently, the same arguments are already being used in the discourse around human enhancement. It is crucial that people with disabilities and disability scholars assert their opinions as early as possible within this discourse, as disabled people will be disproportionately affected if human enhancement raises already unforgiving levels of ability expectation.

References

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