



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2025 Volume II: History, Science, and Racism: The Long Shadow of Eugenics

New Haven and the Lingering Effects of the American Eugenics Movement

Curriculum Unit 25.02.06, published September 2025
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Introduction

I am a History and Law teacher at Metropolitan Business Academy in New Haven, Connecticut. Before coming to New Haven Public Schools, I taught at the middle and high school levels, mostly Social Studies and Language Arts, in Meriden, Bridgeport, Waterbury, and Watertown. Metropolitan Business Academy has a population of about 400 students in grades nine through twelve. The majority of students come from the city of New Haven, with around 20% coming from neighboring, more suburban towns through the magnet school program. I have taught Modern World History and Constitutional Law at Metropolitan Business Academy for three years. This is my first year teaching Dual Enrollment Psychology 100, a class for Metropolitan Business Academy students, in partnership with Southern Connecticut State University, to serve as an introduction to college level psychology and an opportunity to earn college credit while still in high school. This is an upperclassmen elective class open to sophomores, junior, and seniors. Students in the Education & Leadership Pathway are encouraged to take this class, but it is open to all Academic Pathways at Metropolitan Business Academy.

In this unit, students will explore the origins of the eugenics movement, its growth and influence on New Haven and the world throughout the 20th century, and its lasting effects to this day in the context of a Dual Enrollment Psychology course. This unit will be looking at the American Eugenics movement as a whole and the American Eugenics Society as a local organization. The eugenics movement and psychology as a scientific discipline were (and sometimes still are) linked in the late 19th century desire to use science to explain human behavior, improve the human experience, and solve humanity's issues. As the field of psychology was founded from a primarily white, Western European, male perspective, deviations from that demographic were often seen as flawed and in need of correction and/or elimination. This, along with systemic racist and a colonizing mindset, helped foster eugenics, which in turn strengthened the theories of those same early psychologists.

Lesson 1 briefly details the historical origins of eugenics within the context of the history of modern psychology. Lesson 2 focuses on the American Eugenics Society's founding and connections to Yale University and New Haven, CT as a whole. Lesson 3 will discuss case studies of eugenics as policy, and Lesson

4 examine the legacies of eugenics in postwar American society. The final project is a short research project on one of the lasting legacies of eugenics through to the present day.

Content Objectives & Essential Questions

Unit Content Objectives

- Students will be able to identify historical and modern eugenics talking points and practices.
- Students will be able to demonstrate the lasting legacy of the American eugenics movement in modern society and culture.
- Students will be able to describe and evaluate the connections between eugenics and psychology, both historically and in modern practice.

Unit Essential Questions

1. What is eugenics?
2. How did the American Eugenics movement develop, grow, and influence psychology over the course of the twentieth century?
3. What is the lasting legacy of eugenics in the field of psychology and how can we address it?

A Brief History of Eugenics

The Eugenics movement grew out of the Enlightenment Era's search for scientific explanations of the world and nineteenth century scientific advancement. Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution was first introduced in 1859, and his cousin Francis Galton coined the term eugenics in 1883 as part of his own "scientific work" to understand human heredity. Galton believed "that some people are born 'fit' and others 'unfit.' [and that] The fit should be encouraged to have more babies and the unfit fewer."¹ Galton's ideas were not altogether new—he "only one voice among many in that era trying to promote these ideas and apply them to the realities of industrialism, migration, and rapid urbanization."² The Industrial Revolution had wrought significant changes in the social relations and changed the human geography of Galton's home country of the United Kingdom, as well much of Western Europe and the United States. Millions of people moved from farms and villages to cities, which became overcrowded, dirty, and diseased as too many people fit into too little space in very little time. The urban poor were *visible* to the wealthy people who had the time and resources to ponder and theorize about how this blight could be solved.

Across the Atlantic, elites within American society were also grappling with trying to "improve" society through science. Urban elites worried that "the undeserving, the unredeemable, the racial minority, the foreign, the hereditary poor, the inebriate, the mentally deficient, and the criminal would siphon resources and then leave a greater number of degenerate offspring behind."³ Like in Europe, rapid industrialization brought an increase of population in cities, where living and working conditions often exacerbated a city's problems with crime and poverty. Between prisons and mental institutions, the common perception was that the state (and therefore tax paying citizens) supported many of these "undesirables" at a great expense. This led to

the development of Scientific Charity, also known as the New Philanthropy, which valued prevention of degeneracy as well as improvements to existing institutions. Scientific experts of the time “declared the cause of pauperism and crime to be ‘essential,’ some ‘defect inside,’ not merely an effect of education or environment.”⁴ Because they believed that poverty, substance abuse, criminality, etc., were caused by genetic rather than environmental factors, they focused their philanthropy on preventing the passing on of these undesirable traits rather than on alleviating the environmental factors that encouraged them.

The dominant narrative, when discussing the history of discriminatory laws in the United States, usually focuses on the Jim Crow south, but the first eugenics law was passed in the Connecticut legislature in 1895. This law criminalized the “marriage of, or sexual intercourse with, any ‘epileptic, imbecile, or feeble-minded.’” The state even made it illegal to assist in the marriage of ‘any pauper’”⁵ with punishment including jail time and a stiff fine. Many other states followed with their own laws and practices, especially sterilization of the unfit, usually without their consent. As eugenics gained popularity, three epicenters of the American Eugenics movement developed in the so-called Eugenics Triangle: the Human Betterment Foundation in Pasadena, California, led by Paul Popenoe, Edwin Gosney, and David Starr Jordan; the Race Betterment Society in Battle Creek, Michigan, led by John Harvey Kellogg (inventor of corn flakes); and the Eugenic Records Office in Cold Springs Harbor, New York, led by Charles Davenport and Harry Laughlin.

Harry Laughlin in particular led the charge to make sterilization legally viable. He “brought the American hope of curing societal degeneration by sterilizing weak, poor, and non-white people... Laughlin co-opted the language of cases and decisions to ensure that his model bill [avoided being overturned by the courts.]”⁶ Laughlin’s model bill ensured that sterilization went through a due process procedure, even including an appeals process and leaving the final decision to “the cool judgements of medical men.”⁷

In 1927, the Supreme Court heard the case *Buck v. Bell*, a case that tested the legality of Virginia’s Laughlin-style sterilization law. Carrie Buck’s mother had been institutionalized for being feeble-minded, leaving Carrie in foster care. She was allegedly raped by a cousin of her foster family, and became pregnant. Her foster mother then had her committed to the Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded on the grounds of being feeble-minded and promiscuous in 1924. Earlier that year, Virginia had passed its sterilization law, and Carrie Buck was ordered to be sterilized. The Supreme Court upheld the law in a 8 to 1 decision, allowing the state of Virginia to sterilize Carrie Buck. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, in his majority opinion, stated:

The judgment finds the facts that have been recited and that Carrie Buck ‘is the probable potential parent of socially inadequate offspring, likewise afflicted, that she may be sexually sterilized without detriment to her general health and that her welfare and that of society will be promoted by her sterilization,’... We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the State for these lesser sacrifices, often not felt to be such by those concerned, in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence. It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes. Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”⁸

Essentially, Justice Holmes, with the support of seven other justices, argues that because the government asks

for some of its citizens to protect the country with their lives, it is permissible to ask citizens whose very lives are a financial drain to sacrifice something of their lives a well for the better of the country- namely, the prevention of more people who may need institutional support in the future. He likens state mandated sterilization to mandates for vaccines: they both promote the general health of the greater population. This case has never been overturned. Its legacy is found both in the the defense of Nazi war criminals during the Nuremberg trials and the continued practices of sterilizations in mental institutions and prisons in the United States until the present.

Beyond state sponsored sterilizations, Eugenics influenced American culture in the 20th Century in numerous other ways. The desire to remove undesirable traits from the general population merged easily with racist ideas about which races and groups of people were desirable. As early as 1415, European colonizers framed enslavement of Africans as “missionary work. A mission from God to help civilize and Christianize the African ‘savages,’”⁹ inherently valuing European lifestyles over those of the Africans. Popular European philosophers like John Locke, who believed “the most unblemished, purest, perfect minds belonged to Whites, which basically meant that Africans had dirty brains” and Lucilio Vanini, who thought “Africans were born of a ‘different Adam,’ and had a different creation story [which] would mean they were a different species.”¹⁰ The American Founding Fathers, arguing about how to structure the federal legislature, reached an important compromise: The Great Compromise, which established that one half of Congress would have equal representation per state, while the other half would be based on population. This raised the question: are enslaved people and Native Americans people? The smaller Northern states argued they were not people, as recognizing their personhood would give the Southern slave states more governmental power. They settled on a “three-fifths-of-a-man equation [that] worked for both... because it fit right into the argument that slaves were both human and subhuman, which they both agreed on.”¹¹

The early 19th century saw industrialization in the United States, much like Europe, but it also saw massive waves of immigration. One example is the immigration of the Irish after the Irish Potato Famine. Despite usually speaking English after several centuries of English colonization and rule, the Irish were not welcomed by many Americans. Irish workers helped build “the Erie Canal and thousands of miles of railways but they became disposable workers. They had high accident rates because they were often assigned to do the most hazardous jobs... The many deaths of railroad workers gave rise to a saying: An Irishman is buried under every tie.”¹² The poor treatment of the Irish led to conflicts with Chinese immigrants, who were touted as “harder working and quicker to learn than the Irish.”¹³ In addition, oppressed Irish immigrants tried to appeal to the greater American culture by identifying with their whiteness, as opposed to African Americans, which in turn led to hostility. Black journalist John E. Bruce wrote, “It is to be regretted that in [America] where the outcasts- the scum of European society- can come and enjoy the fullest social and political privileges, the Native Born American with wooly hair and dark complexion is made the Victim.”¹⁴ Here we see two oppressed minorities appealing to proto-Eugenic thought: the Irish, identifying with whiteness to raise themselves above black Americans, and black Americans indulging in nativism to avoid being oppressed by the Irish. In the end, the whiteness of the Irish immigrants and their children allowed them to assimilate into American society: “White immigrants could become naturalized citizens. White young people could apply to the best colleges and universities. The Chinese were prevented by racial laws from becoming naturalized citizens, and large numbers of African Americans had had their right to vote stripped away. But the Irish had suffrage and they used their right to vote to gain political power.”¹⁵

Eugenicists in the early 20th century, aiming to improve the American population as a whole, were almost always anti-immigrant. Congress and the eugenicists worked together to shape the American ethnic diversity

to their liking. The Immigration Law of 1924 was “designed to reduce immigration from southern and eastern Europe. It established quotas, or limits, on the number of people who could enter the United States from each nationality... equal to 2 percent of the total number of people of that nationality who had been in the United States in 1890.”¹⁶ Given previous limitations on immigration from places like Asia and Eastern Europe, this new quota based on the number of people already in the United States limited ethnic diversity.

Another immigrant group, Mexicans, were also the focus of nativist attitudes. The popular view among white elites was that Mexicans were good only for manual labor, usually farm work.

The sugar-beet growers worried that if every Mexican got a high school education, there would be no one to pick their beets. “Educated Mexicans,” one farmer said, “are the hardest to handle... They make more desirable citizens if they would stop about the seventh grade.” One Mexican American student remembered his sixth-grade teacher advising him not to go to high school, with the words, “Your people are here to dig ditches, to do pick and shovel work. I don’t think any of you should plan to go to high school.”¹⁷

One aspect of many Mexicans that alarmed nativists was their tendency to be mixed race, and therefore inferior. During the Great Depression, massive deportations of Mexican and even US-born Mexican Americans resulted from anti-Mexican sentiment. We can still see echoes of these anti-immigrant views today, in President Trump’s Presidential Proclamation RESTRICTING THE ENTRY OF FOREIGN NATIONALS TO PROTECT THE UNITED STATES FROM FOREIGN TERRORISTS AND OTHER NATIONAL SECURITY AND PUBLIC SAFETY THREATS, issued on June 4, 2025: “The United States must ensure that admitted aliens and aliens otherwise already present in the United States do not bear hostile attitudes toward its citizens, culture, government, institutions, or founding principles, and do not advocate for, aid, or support designated foreign terrorists or other threats to our national security.”¹⁸ Despite what this proclamation asserts, the First Amendment right to free speech applies to non-citizens just as much as it does to citizens. Before winning the election, Trump spoke often about immigrants being a danger to American citizens, claiming “Many of them murdered far more than one person, and they’re now happily living in the United States. You know, now a murderer, I believe this, it’s in their genes. And we got a lot of bad genes in our country right now.”¹⁹ This statement not only ignores the statistical evidence that immigrants commit fewer crimes than citizens, but it also exposes the inherent eugenic views of this administration: that criminal behavior is encoded in a person’s genes.

One final example of the persistence of eugenic thought, happening as this unit is being written, is the aftermath of the New York City Democratic mayoral primary. After winning the Democratic nomination in the New York mayoral race, Zohran Mamdani, a naturalized US citizen of Indian descent, has been targeted by Trump and his associates. Republican Representative Andy Ogles of Tennessee called for Mamdani to be denaturalized and deported, calling him “‘little muhammad’ in a post to X [and] adding that the mayoral hopeful ‘is an antisemitic, socialist, communist who will destroy the great City of New York... He needs to be DEPORTED... Which is why I am calling for him to be subject to denaturalization proceedings.’”²⁰ Similarly, White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller wrote “NYC is the clearest warning yet of what happens to a society when it fails to control migration,” and the New York Young Republicans Club tweeted “A CALL TO ACTION FROM THE NYJR... The radical Zohran Mamdani cannot be allowed to destroy our beloved city of New York. The Communist Control Act lets President Trump revoke @ZohranKMamdani’s citizenship and promptly deport him.”²¹ These ad hominem attacks focus on Mamdani’s status as a Muslim immigrant, calling on the federal government to remove his citizenship and deport him because of political differences. As Peterson

summarized in *The Shortest History of Eugenics*,

The threat of eugenics *as actually experienced in history*... has never been about superchildren or curing diseases...Fearing degeneration, European and American eugenicists have, more often than not, walked the oath of disciplining and punishing the weak and the marginalized, scorning purported love-thy-neighbor principles to do so. And American physicians continued to conduct these eugenic surgeries even *after* the menace of the Nazi eugenics became well known. We are, once again, in an era of rising paranoia over white “replacement” by the “brown menace.”²²

Lesson 1: What is Eugenics?

Objective: By the end of this lesson, students should be able to define eugenics.

Opener: Gallery walk of American Eugenics images.

- Two possible methods of gallery walk:
 - Students get a certain number of sticky notes, and must leave a comment on that many images and quotes with something that stands out to them or that they are wondering.
 - Students have a worksheet with a space for each image/quote with questions directing them to analyze the image, for example, “What do you see in the image?” “What does this remind you of?”
- Suggested Images:
 - <https://pged.org/history-of-eugenics/> [Image descriptions: 1. A photo of four small children, winners of a baby contest. Photo by Emanuel Wolfe (1858-1933). Source: Nebraska State Historical Society, NSHS RG2836.PH0-532. A Eugenic Certificate, which reads, “This Guarantees that I have examined the sender of this card and finds a perfect PHYSICAL and MENTAL BALANCE and unusually strong EUGENIC LOVE possibilities, well fitted to promote the happiness and future welfare of the race.” “Eugenic Certificate”, circa 1924, Source: Robert Bogdan Collection.]
 - <https://www.nature.com/scitable/forums/genetics-generation/america-s-hidden-history-the-eugenics-movement-123919444/> [Image description: A man in red tones scattering seeds with a yellow background. Text: Only healthy seed must be sown! Check the seeds of hereditary disease and unfitness by Eugenics.”]
 - <https://storymd.com/journal/j69d6q30zj-genetics-glossary-letters-d-e-f/page/xz63p1dlgx2-eugenics> [Image description: Eugenics Logo from the Second International Eugenics Conference in New York City in September of 1921. Image of a tree labeled “Eugenics” with roots labelled with academic fields “Anatomy, Physiology, Biology, Psychology, Genetics, Mental Testing, Anthropology, History, Geology, Anthropometry, Archeology, Ethnology, Geography, Law, Statistics, Politics, Economics, Biography, Genealogy, Education, Sociology, Religion, Psychiatry, Surgery, Medicine”. Text surrounding the tree is the text “Eugenics is the self direction of human evolution.” Under the tree, text reads “Like a tree Eugenics draws its materials from many sources and organizes them into an harmonious entity.”]
 - <https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Triangle-of-Life-1926-Susqui-Centennial-Exhibition-Philad>

elphia-PA-Courtesy-of-the_fig3_325721824 [Image description: Two posters side by side. Left side reads: "Unfit human traits such as feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, criminality, insanity, alcoholism, pauperism, and many others, run in families and are inherited in exactly the same way as color in guinea-pigs. If ALL MARRIAGES were EUGENIC we could BREED OUT most of this unfitness in THREE GENERATIONS." Right side reads: "The Triangle of Life... YOU can improve your education. And even change your environment: but what you really ARE was LI settled when your parents were born. Selected parents will have BETTER CHILDREN. THIS IS THE AIM OF EUGENICS."]

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:United_States_eugenics_advocacy_poster.jpg [Image description: Poster which reads "Some people are born to be a burden on the rest." Four smaller white posters with statistics and a Fitter Family contest.]
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mental_defectives_in_Virginia-\(1915\)-\(14587462548\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mental_defectives_in_Virginia-(1915)-(14587462548).jpg) [Image description: A staircase illustration with five steps. Text reads: "STEPS IN MENTAL DEVELOPMENT. Where they stumble- the limit of development of each type. (reprint from the survey of Oct. 11-13.) From bottom left to top right: IDIOT - Self preservation. LOW GRADE IMBECILE - Simple Menial Work. MEDIUM IMBECILE - Simple Manual Labor. HIGH GRADE IMBECILE - Complex Manual Work. MORON - Work Requiring Reason & Judgement."]
- http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=1072 [Image description: "Crime and Race Descent" 3rd International Eugenics Conference , 1932]
- http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=1247 [Image description: Illustration of a staircase with men on various ethnicities. Text reads "FORGERY and FRAUD. Rankings of Native Whites of Foreign Parentage." Teutonic 2. British 3. Scandinavian 4. French 5. Polish-Austrian 6. Near Eastern 7. Irish 8. Spanish 9. Italian]
- http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=567 [Image description: "Massachusetts department of mental diseases exhibits pictures of 59 criminal brains"]
- http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=1049 [Image description: letter from C.M. Goethe to the Press about high Mexican birthrates, includes quote: 'Peons multiply like rabbits'"]
- http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=996 [Image description: A statistics chart labeled "Average dimensions for white and colored races"]
- http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=1442 [Image description: a chart labeled "Amount of Negro and Other Colored Blood Illegal in Various States for Marriage to Whites: 1929"]
- http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=2089 [Image description: a blue booklet labeled "Directions for responding to a survey on "Ethnological Enquiries on the Innate Character and Intelligence of Different Races," by Francis Galton"]

- Suggested quotes:

- "Personally I had most to do with the new Southbury Training School for defective children, which was laid out as two villages of small houses, one for boys and one for girls. On the outskirts were schools, infirmary, and offices. With the trustees of this institution I met frequently during a long period, from the day when its site was selected, to the day I left office, Their aim was to combine home and school and medical treatment for mentally handicapped children in a beautiful countryside. Within two years after the institution was opened, it was visited by more than 2,000 people, hundreds of them coming from other States to see how Connecticut was training subnormal children of all degrees for useful lives wherever possible."²³ Wilbur Cross, *Connecticut Yankee: An Autobiography*

- “Racial antagonism appeared to be nonexistent everywhere we went. Interracial marriages were so common that they seemed at first sight to be the rule. One day I met at luncheon a very cultivated woman of strange beauty, the wife of a man with whom I was acquainted... She was part white and part Hawaiian, with perhaps a tincture of Chinese blood. At any rate, she inherited the best characteristics of the races to which she belonged.”²⁴ Wilbur Cross, *Connecticut Yankee: An Autobiography*
- “Native Hawaiians of the older generation in whom not much other blood was infused we saw at one of their outdoor feasts under the shade of tall coconut trees. They displayed great deftness in twisting poi from large bowls round two fingers and conveying it to their mouths without dropping a particle of it. On this, their staple diet, they had grown fat. Rotundity seemed to be cultivated by women as a mark of beauty. They still wore loose Mother Hubbards similar to those with which their ancestral mothers were clothed by the first missionaries who were shocked by scanty attire... The young generation of native Hawaiians had broken away from the dress and habits of their parents and grandparents. We saw them all at play at Waikiki where they were riding high waves on planks or in outriggers.”²⁵ Wilbur Cross, *Connecticut Yankee: An Autobiography*
- “There is no element of force in our teachings; that is, we would not force any family to limit the number of their children against their will, tho we would endeavor to create a public opinion which would consider it a disgrace for any family to have more children than they can bring up and educate properly. We would consider it a disgrace, an anti-social act for any family to bring children into the world whom they must send out at an early age into the mills, shops and streets to earn a living, or must fall back upon public charity to save them from starvation. Public opinion is stronger than any laws, and in time people would be as much ashamed of having children whom they could not bring up properly in every sense of the word, as they are not ashamed of having their children turn out criminals... As far as couples are concerned who are well-to-do, who love children, and who are well capable of taking care of a large number, we, that is, we American limitationists, would put no limit. On the contrary, we would say: ‘God bless you, have as many children as you want to; there is plenty of room yet for all of you.’”²⁶ William J. Robinson, William J. *Birth Control or the Limitation of Offspring*
- “I prefer a commonwealth of five million people, all of them healthy and contented, all doing congenial work, all having work to do, all materially comfortable, all educated and cultured, all free to think and free to express their thoughts, with higher humanity, to an empire or a republic of a hundred million, all fighting, all struggling, all cutting each other’s throats, all in fear of starvation, with senseless luxury on one hand and shameful poverty on the other, with killing idleness on one hand and killing overwork on the other, with bursting over-satiation on the hand and exhausting starvation on the other; with millions tramping the streets and highways naked and hungry, with millions of human beings illiterate, held in the clutches of superstition, selfishness and brutishness; with thousands and thousands of imbeciles, criminals, pervers, grafters, prostitutes- female prostitutes who sell their bodies and male prostitutes who sell their minds, their ideas and convictions- I prefer, I say, the above-described small to the above-described larger commonwealth.”²⁷ William J. Robinson, William J. *Birth Control or the Limitation of Offspring*
- “In other words, in countries like England and the United States, the most marked diminution of the birth rate has been among the aristocracy, among the cultured classes, among artists lawyers, physicians, clergymen, merchants, etc., while it has been but slightly diminished among the workmen and among the poor and very poor. In fact, you can take it as an axiom that the number of children is in inverse ratio to the social standing, culture and earning capacity of the

parents. In still other words, it means that this best fit to breed children, those most likely to transmit a desirable heredity, and those most able to bring up children, are breeding less and less, while those least able to and least capable of bringing up children and giving them a decent education and a decent start in life, and those most tainted with disease, with alcoholism, mental instability, epilepsy, insanity, moronism, etc., keep on breeding unrestrainedly. What that means for the future of a nation the most sluggish thinker can easily perceive. It means that, if no check be put to this state of affairs, eventually the mental and physical standard of the race will be lowered, that the race will begin to degenerate.”²⁸ William J. Robinson, William J. *Birth Control or the Limitation of Offspring*

- “the only remedy we have at command is to instruct the lower classes to make use of the same means so that they may not by their unrestricted breeding overwhelm the better elements, pollute the race-stock and add to human misery.”²⁹ William J. Robinson, William J. *Birth Control or the Limitation of Offspring*
- “We know perfectly well that there are people whom it is a crime to permit to bring children into the world. About the unquestionably insane, imbeciles, morons, and perverts, we need not worry in this respect. Society will have to take care of them by sterilizing them or segregating them. But there are people who can very well get married, provided they do not bring children into the world. Among such we may mention people suffering tuberculosis, epilepsy, perhaps cancer and certain mental abnormalities. We have no right to deprive those people of any affection in their lives. And besides, it would be worse than useless to do so. If you raise the barriers for entering matrimony too high, if you make your requirements for a marriage certificate too rigid, those people will be sure to enter into illicit unions, and this means an enormous increase in prostitution and illegitimacy, two undoubted evils. But teach those people the proper means of prevention of conception and the problem is solved. Leaving out of consideration the imbeciles, morons, and degenerates who could not be taught to use any precautionary measures, and hom, as I said before, society will have to protect itself against in a different way, there are no parents who would deliberately bring children into the world whom they had reason to fear would be tainted with hereditary disease. No sane parents wish to bring into the world handicapped, maimed and deformed children.”³⁰ William J. Robinson, William J. *Birth Control or the Limitation of Offspring*
- “Darwin himself endorsed eugenics, and he drew on the familiar trope of animal husbandry to make the case: ‘Man scans with scrupulous care the pedigree of his horses, cattle, and dogs before he mates them; but when it comes to his marriage, he rarely, or never, takes such care.’ Compare Thomas Jefferson-- the wording is practically identical: ‘The circumstance of superior beauty is thought worthy of attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not that of man?’ Almost as a mantra, eugenicists compared good human stock to thoroughbreds, equating the wellborn with superior ability and inherited fitness”³¹ Nancy Isenberg. *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*.
- “the only cure for white trash had to be a radical one: intervention. Take a child out of his family’s hovel and place him in an asylum, where he might at least learn to work and avoid producing more inbred offspring. The genealogical link had to be cut.”³² Nancy Isenberg. *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*.
- “Even with such racial overtones, the major target of eugenicists was the poor white woman. Goddard’s description of the female moron as one lacking forethought, vitality, or any sense of shame perfectly replicated Reconstruction writers’ portrayal of white trash. Davenport felt the best policy was to quarantine dangerous women during their fertile years. How this policy prescription led to sterilization is rather more calculated: interested politicians and eager

reformers concluded that it was cheaper to operate on women than to house them in asylums for decades. Southern eugenicists in particular argued that sterilization helped the economy by sending poor women back into the population safely neutered but still able to work at menial jobs.”³³ Nancy Isenberg. *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*.

Activity:

- Read CT Post article about Wilbur Cross & Study the Laws and Facilities of Connecticut Pertaining to the Prevention, Treatment and Care of Mental Defects and Disease and Allied Problems
<https://www.ctpost.com/news/article/The-Ugly-Truth-Behind-a-Connecticut-Eugenics-13697732.php>
- Discuss & Define: What is eugenics? What is the connection to the Nazi regime? What connections does it have to American society and history? (This is a good time to gauge students’ background knowledge of Nazi ideology. One cannot assume that students have been exposed to the Holocaust and World War II.)

Lesson 2: The American Eugenics Movement & American Eugenics Society

Objective: By the end of this lesson, students will be able to describe New Haven, CT’s role as a center for American eugenics and describe how early psychology helped shape American eugenics.

Opening: Have students define eugenics in their own words.

Activity 1: Virtual Anti-Eugenics Tour of New Haven

- <https://www.antieugenicscollective.org/student-works/project-one-ephnc-rxje5-b5ptl-xjgs2-ay5gn>
- Option 1: Actually walk through downtown New Haven, stopping at each location and discussing its significance.
- Option 2: Assign each student (or group of students) a location. Take the tour by having each group share the significance of their location.
- Option 3: Create a gallery walk of the locations and proceed in similar fashion to the gallery walk in lesson 1.

Activity 2:

- Read and discuss “The Long Shadow of the Eugenics Movement” article from Psychology Today
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/written/201806/the-long-shadow-the-eugenics-movement>

Lesson 3: Case studies in eugenic thought & treatments

Objective: By the end of this lesson, students will be able to discuss how eugenics affected the lives of Deborah Kallikak and Carrie Buck.

Opener: Display images of Deborah Kallikak and Carrie Buck. Invite students to describe the women and

hypothesize how eugenics affected their lives.

- Suggested Kallikak images
 - https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Deborah-Kallikak-ages-13-and-17-Goddard-HH-1912-The-Kallikak-Family-A-Study-in_fig8_325721824
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Kallikak_Family#/media/File:Kallikak_Family_caricature.png
 - https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/The_Kallikak_Family#/media/File:Kallikaks_chart1.jpg
- Suggested Buck images and background information
 - <https://www.npr.org/2018/04/23/604926914/emma-carrie-vivian-how-a-family-became-a-test-case-for-forced-sterilizations>
 - <https://undark.org/2017/10/04/carrie-buck-letters-eugenics/>

Activities:

Activity 1: Kallikak Family

Activity 1: Kallikak Family Case Study suggested selections with questions.

Henry Herbert Goddard, an American psychologist and eugenicist, was the Director of Research of the Vineland Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys in Vineland, New Jersey from 1906-1918. This institution was one of the first laboratories in the United States studying intellectual disability. At Vineland, Goddard coined the terms moron, imbecile, and idiot in their 'scientific' definitions based on IQ scores. Goddard favored institutionalization of the 'feeble-minded' as opposed to compulsory sterilization. In 1912, Goddard published *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness*, which diagramed the descendants of Revolutionary War soldier Martin Kallikak (a pseudonym). His children and other descendants from his marriage, according to Goddard, had no signs of intellectual disability, while the descendants of his illegitimate child had resulted in a line of criminals and intellectually disabled people. Goddard in particular focused on one resident of at Vineland, pseudonym Deborah Kallikak, and chronicled her abilities over time. Below are suggested selections and questions from *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness*, focusing on both Goddard's opinions about the treatment of the feeble-minded, and on Deborah Kallikak.. This book is public domain and available for free on Project Gutenberg or at the Internet Archive at the link in the bibliography.

Selections from *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* by Henry Herbert Goddard (1866-1957)³⁴

"We have here a family of good English blood of the middle class... Then a scion of this family, in an unguarded moment, steps aside from the paths of rectitude and with the help of a feeble-minded girl, starts a line of mental defectives that is truly appalling. After this mistake, he returns to the traditions of his family, marries a woman of his own quality, and through her carries on a line of respectability equal to that of his ancestors. We thus have two series from two different mothers but the same father. These extend for six generations... no amount of education or good environment can change a feeble-minded individual into a normal one, any more than it can change a red-haired stock into a black-haired stock...

A great majority [of morons] become at once a direct burden upon society. These divide according to

temperament into two groups. Those who are phlegmatic, sluggish, indolent, simply lie down and would starve to death, if some one did not help them... The other type is of the nervous, excitable, irritable kind who try to make a living, and not being able to do it by a fair day's work and honest wages, attempt to succeed through dishonest methods... These become the criminal type... These are the people of good outward appearance, but of low intelligence, who pass through school without acquiring any efficiency, then go out into the world and must inevitably fall into some such life as we have pictured...

There are Kallikak families all about us. They are multiplying at twice the rate of the general population, and not until we recognize this fact, and work on this basis, will we begin to solve these social problems...

When we conclude that had the nameless girl been segregated in an institution, this defective family would not have existed, we of course do not mean that one single act of precaution, in that case, would have solved the problem, but we mean that all such cases, male and female, must be taken care of, before their propagation will cease...

Before considering any other method, the writer would insist that segregation and colonization is not by any means as hopeless a plan as it may seem to those who look only at the immediate increase in the tax rate... if these feeble-minded children were early selected and carefully trained, they would become more or less self-supporting in their institutions, so that the expense of their maintenance would be greatly reduced...

The other method proposed of solving the problem is to take away from these people the power of procreation... There are two great practical difficulties in the way of carrying out this method on any large scale. The first is the strong opposition to this practice on the part of the public generally. It is regarded as mutilation of the human body and as such is opposed vigorously by many people... In recent years surgeons have discovered another method which has many advantages... It is more properly spoken of as sterilization, the distinction being that it does not have any effect on the sex qualities of the man or woman, but does artificially take away the power of procreation by rendering the person sterile... A more serious objection to this last method comes from a consideration of the social consequences. What will be the effect upon the community in the spread of debauchery and disease through having within it a group of people who are thus free to gratify their instincts without fear of consequences in the form of children? The indications are that here also the evil consequences are more imaginary than real, since the feeble-minded seldom exercise restraint in any case."

Selection from "THE STORY OF DEBORAH" *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness*

"She had been born in an almshouse. Her mother had afterwards married, not the father of this child, but the prospective father of another child, and later had divorced him and married another man, who was also the father of some of her children... On the plea that the child did not get along well at school and might possibly be feeble-minded, she gained admission to the Training School."

At admission: (Age 8)

- Physically normal
- Washes and dresses herself. Careless in dress.
- Understands commands. Not very obedient. Listens well.
- Knows a few letters. Cannot read nor count. Knows all the colors.
- Not fond of music.
- Memory poor.

- Can use a needle. Can carry wood and fill a kettle. Can throw a ball, but cannot catch.
- Sees and hears well.
- Excitable but not nervous.
- Not affectionate and quite noisy.
- Obstinate and destructive.
- Been to school. No results.

From Institution Reports:

By Age 12:

- Counts well. Good at addition.
- Knows a number of words. Writes them from memory. Reads a little.
- Memorizes quickly.
- Music: sings, plays cornet. "She plays by ear."
- Helps make beds and waits on table, is quick with her work, but is very noisy.
- Sewing- made a pillow sham. Learned to weave.
- Excellent worker in gardening class.
- "Her mind wanders a great deal. In the midst of a lesson, that she has apparently paid a great deal of attention to, she will ask a question that has no bearing on the lesson at all... Her attention is very hard to keep. Is restless in class."

By Age 22

- Can write a fairly good story, but spells very few words. Has little idea of the use of capitals. It is difficult for her to separate her sentences.
- Drawing, painting, coloring, and any kind of hand work she does quite nicely.
- In clay modeling, her idea of form is quite good.
- Knows how to use a sewing machine. Made & embroidered a suit (shirt, skirt, jacket). Made & embroidered a linen dress & a corset cover.
- Woodcarving- made a chair & later upholstered it. Made a large dressing case, made a book rest with mission ends and is now working on a shirtwaist box with mortise and tenon joints and lap joints.
- Uses tape measure accurately.
- Can play on cornet four hard band pieces and three solos, also reads at sight easy songs and hymns.
- "She has shown a great amount of patience, perseverance, and judgment in her work this year, has been anxious to do her work, and has been a good girl."
- "She is cheerful, inclined to be quarrelsome, very active and restless, very affectionate, willing, and tries; is quick and excitable, fairly good-tempered. Learns a new occupation quickly, but requires a half hour or twenty-four repetitions to learn four lines. Retains well what she has once learned. Needs close supervision."
- "Can run an electric sewing machine, cook, and do practically everything about the house."
- "Very fond of children and good in helping care for them. Has a good sense of order and cleanliness. Is sometimes very stubborn and obstinate. Is not always truthful and has been known to steal, although does not have a reputation for this. Is proud of her clothes."

Suggested Discussion or Written Response Questions for Deborah Kallikak Case Study

- How did attending/living at Vineland help Deborah grow and develop?

- Do you think Deborah would have turned out differently if she had not gone to Vineland?
- Goddard would say that Deborah (and people like her) should live in an institution for their whole lives and not get married and/or have children. Do you agree with his assessment? Do you think Deborah could live outside of an institution?

Activity 2: Buck v Bell

Carrie Buck was a ‘feeble minded’ young woman who was committed to an institution and scheduled to be sterilized under a Virginia law that allowed for sterilization of inmates. In 1927, in an 8 to 1 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that because the law required a hearing before the sterilization surgery took place, it was constitutional. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in his opinion that “three generations of imbeciles was enough,” referring to Carrie Buck, her mother, and her newborn daughter. Below are several suggested readings on the case. This case illustrates how eugenics was (and still is) part of US law and jurisprudence. The Buck v Bell ruling has never been overturned.

Suggested readings on the Buck v Bell Case:

- <https://learn.academy4sc.org/video/buck-v-bell-1927/>
- <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1900-1940/274us200>
- <https://www.npr.org/2018/04/23/604926914/emma-carrie-vivian-how-a-family-became-a-test-case-for-forced-sterilizations>
- <https://undark.org/2017/10/04/carrie-buck-letters-eugenics/>

Suggested discussion or written response questions for Buck v Bell.

- What impact did the Buck v Bell case have on Carrie Buck’s family? What impact did it have on American society as a whole?
- Why do you think this decision has never been overturned? Is it important that it is overturned?
- What has changed since 1927 in our understanding of intellectual disabilities, mental disorders, and trauma?

Closure

Have students reflect on how Deborah Kallikak and Carrie Buck were treated by their governments and society. How has the treatment of intellectually disabled individuals changed over time, as evidenced by personal experience of the students? (Think about access to special education in schools, or places in the local community where people with intellectual disabilities are employed.)

Lesson 4: Post World War II Eugenics in the US

Objective: By the end of this lesson, students will be able to make connections between early eugenics and post-World War II practices in the United States.

Opener: Using a method of your choosing, for example a short writing prompt or a restorative circle, informally assess how much students know about the Nazi eugenics program. If there are significant gaps, this is the time to fill them. Afterwards, ask students if they think eugenics continued in the United States

after World War II and to support their hypothesis.

Activity: Discussion on some or all of the following topics:

- Generalized background knowledge: <https://www.thecollector.com/modern-eugenics-evolution/>
- Time Magazine article about Sterilization Laws, July 23, 1973
<https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,878602-1,00.html>
- NYT article about Sterilization Laws, July 13, 1973
<https://www.nytimes.com/1973/07/13/archives/suit-seeks-to-void-sterilization-law-aclu-asks-1million-for-north.html#>
- Loving v Virginia 1967
 - Facing History & Ourselves Reading
<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/eugenics-race-marriage>
 - National Archives Article “The Fight for the Right to Marry: The Loving v. Virginia Case”
<https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2021/02/11/the-fight-for-the-right-to-marry-the-loving-v-virginia-a-case/>
- Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 repealed and replaced by the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965
- anti-LGBT laws, forced chemical castrations, conversion therapy
- Article from INDY Week (Durham, NC)
<https://indyweek.com/news/american-eugenics-movement-world-war-ii-part-1-3/>

Lesson 5: Lasting Effects of Eugenics Today Research Project

Objective: By the end of this lesson, students will have developed a deeper understanding of one legacy of eugenics. They will also be able to explain their topic in a small group setting. Opener: Informal discussion of covered topics. What has stuck out to students? What surprised them?

Activity:

- This activity will take between two and three classes for research, with one class for roundtable presentations
- Students create a poster, zine, or slideshow and present it in a small group of peers in the roundtable format. (Teacher has the choice of offering all three format options or selecting one.)
 - How to make an Eight Page Zine by Brian Huntress
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkhjcJ1XXrU>
- Roundtable sample
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lrVGeCw3VZgjxHqWbVtJ9RiqTIMyqvMiyrs2JtKXYXY/edit?usp=sharing>
- Possible topics: medical racism; replacement theory; American white supremacy; Tuskegee Syphilis experiment; treatment of ESL students in schools, historical and modern; special education testing; biases in SAT and other standardized tests, and the concept and/or need for standardized testing; conservatorship; marriage inequality for disabled people (in US and UK, possibly other nations as well); ableism in tech, design, public life; perfect attendance awards; eradication of Down's syndrome in Iceland; abortion & sterilization availability differences by race; Margaret Sanger's motivations in

founding Planned Parenthood; plastic surgery & beauty standards; anti-vaxxers; baby contests->beauty pageants for toddlers?; redlining & 'bad schools' & 'inferior races'; race based professionalism standards (Abercrombie & Fitch, hair laws); diversity in children's books; CRISPR; designer babies; anti-maskers; cosmetology school only teaching how to do white hair; inaccessibility in public spaces/ADA, 504 and IEP; interracial marriage laws; sterilization of Puerto Rican women (La Operacion); 'Mississippi appendectomy' sterilization of southern Black women; Buck v Bell compared to Skinner v Oklahoma; sterilizations of incarcerated women in California in the 2010s; Trump administration (or any recent presidential administration) and eugenics;

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Appendix on Implementing District Standards

Relevant Connecticut Social Studies Frameworks:

- INQ 9–12.6 Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.
- INQ 9–12.11 Construct explanations using sound reasoning, correct sequence (linear or non-linear), examples, and details with significant and pertinent information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanation given its purpose (e.g., cause and effect, chronological, procedural, technical)
- INQ 9–12.12 Present adaptations of arguments and explanations that feature evocative ideas and perspectives on issues and topics to reach a range of audiences and venues outside the classroom using print and oral technologies (e.g., posters, essays, letters, debates, speeches, reports, and maps) and digital technologies (e.g., Internet, social media, and digital documentary).
- INQ 9–12.15 Use disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses to understand the characteristics and causes of local, regional, and global problems; instances of such problems in multiple contexts; and challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address these problems over time and place.
- HIST 9–12.1 Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
- HIST 9–12.3 Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

- HIST 9–12.4 Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives. (e.g., immigration, labor, the role of women).
- HIST 9–12.5 Analyze the ways in which the perspectives of those writing history shaped the history that they produced.
- HIST 9–12.6 Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.
- HIST 9–12.7 Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people at the time
- GEO 9–12.3 Evaluate the impact of economic activities, political decisions, cultural practices, and climate variability on human migration, resource use, and settlement patterns

Notes

1. (Peterson 2024, 2)
2. (Peterson 2024, 3)
3. (Peterson 2024, 58)
4. (Peterson 2024, 61)
5. (Peterson 2024, 61)
6. (Peterson 2024, 78)
7. (Peterson 2024, 79)
8. (Holmes, n.d.)
9. (Reynolds and Kendi 2020, 9)
10. (Reynolds and Kendi 2020, 22)
11. (Reynolds and Kendi 2020, 61)
12. (Takaki 2012, 109)
13. (Takaki 2012, 111)
14. (Takaki 2012, 113)
15. (Takaki 2012, 119)
16. (Takaki 2012, 232)
17. (Takaki 2012, 247)
18. (Trump 2025)
19. (Slattery and Cooke 2024)
20. (Harounoff et al. 2025)
21. (Harounoff et al. 2025)
22. (Peterson 2024, 257=258)
23. (Cross 1943, 371)
24. (Cross 1943, 164)
25. (Cross 1943, 165)
26. (Robinson 1924, 25-27)
27. (Robinson 1924, 50-51)
28. (Robinson 1924, 52-53)
29. (Robinson 1924, 54-55)
30. (Robinson 1924, 124-126)
31. (Isenberg 2017, 175)
32. (Isenberg 2017, 181)

33. (Isenberg 2017, 197)
34. Goddard, H. H. (1916).

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