



LESSON PLAN & TEACHER'S GUIDE

Using Primary Sources to Examine the History of Eugenics

Aim

How can we use primary sources to discover how the eugenics movement became popularized in the United States and Europe?

Time

This lesson can be adjusted to fill 1 or 2 classes.

Guiding questions

- How did the eugenics movement use propaganda to enter mainstream American thought and promote its agenda?
- Why did some leaders believe that certain groups of people were unfit to have children?
- How can we use primary source documents to explore issues of race, gender and class during the early to mid-20th century?

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Analyze original images and documents from the American eugenics movement
- Discuss how genetics can be used to enhance peoples' lives and ways to prevent it from being used as a new form of eugenics.
- Make connections between the American Eugenics Movement and other historical events, such as the Nazi regime in Germany during World War II.

Materials

Handouts, laptop, projector or SMART board.

Standards alignment

Common Core Standards

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.9-10.2](#) Determine the central ideas or conclusions of a text; trace the text's explanation or depiction of a complex process, phenomenon, or concept; provide an accurate summary of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3](#) Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9](#) Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

Next Generation Science Standards

This pgEd lesson integrates some of the NGSS practices and cross cutting concepts associated with the following disciplinary core ideas. The relevant portion of each disciplinary core idea is written out below.

[HS-LS3: Inheritance and Variation of Traits](#)

LS3.B: Variation of Traits

- Environmental factors also affect expression of traits, and hence affect the probability of occurrences of traits in a population. Thus the variation and distribution of traits observed depends on both genetic and environmental factors.

Background information and note to teachers

New genetic technologies are allowing us to assess and alter our own DNA and the world around. With it comes excitement about the potential for treating disease, as well as fears that some applications (such as embryo screening, prenatal testing of fetal DNA, and genome editing) could lead to a new era of eugenics. This lesson, in combination with our lesson "[Genetics, History and the American Eugenics Movement](#)", will introduce students to the term "eugenics" and equip them with a foundation of historical knowledge about the eugenics movement that began in the United States in the early 20th century. The goal is for students to develop a more informed lens for discussing the benefits and implications of genetic technologies that are emerging today.

Eugenics is the philosophy and social movement that argues it is possible to improve the human race and society by encouraging reproduction by people or populations with “desirable” traits (termed “positive” eugenics) and discouraging reproduction by people with “undesirable” qualities (termed “negative” eugenics). Eugenic ideas about the value of different social classes have been used to justify discrimination, slavery, and genocide around the world for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. In the early 20th century, as geneticists began to widely recognize the basic principles of inheritance (discovered by Gregor Mendel decades before), the science of modern genetics played a significant role in advancing the arguments in favor of government policies in the United States prohibiting interracial marriage, restricting immigration, and sterilizing individuals against their will or without their knowledge. The scientific arguments were flawed from the beginning yet took root and grew. This history, known as the American eugenics movement, was supported and encouraged by a wide swath of people, including everyday citizens, politicians, scientists, social reformers, prominent business leaders, and influential individuals who shared a goal of reducing the “burden” on society.

Eugenicists argued that parents from “good stock” produced healthier and intellectually superior children. They believed that “traits” such as poverty, shiftlessness, criminality and poor work ethic were inherited, and that people of Nordic ancestry were inherently superior to other peoples, despite an obvious lack of evidence and scientific proof. In the early 20th century, not all scientists were supportive of the scientific underpinnings of eugenics. However, eugenicists were able to persuade the Carnegie Institution and prestigious universities to support their work, thus legitimizing it and creating the perception that their philosophy was, in fact, science.

The eugenics movement became widely seen as a legitimate way to improve society and was supported by people such as Winston Churchill, Margaret Sanger, Theodore Roosevelt and John Harvey Kellogg (of Kellogg’s cereal). Eugenics became an academic discipline at many prominent colleges, including Harvard University. From the outset, the movement also had critics, including lawyer and civil rights advocate Clarence Darrow as well as scientists who refuted the idea that “purity” leads to fewer negative gene mutations. Nevertheless, the United States became the first country to have a systematic program for performing sterilizations on individuals without their knowledge or against their will. The majority of people targeted for sterilization were deemed of inferior intelligence, particularly poor people and eventually people of color.¹

Between 1927 and the 1970s, there were more than 60,000 compulsory sterilizations performed in 33 states in the United States; California led the nation with over 20,000.

¹ Black, Edwin, War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race (Dialog Press, 2003).

Experts think many more sterilizations were likely performed, but not officially recorded.²

Adolf Hitler based some of his early ideas about eugenics on the programs practiced in the United States. He became its most infamous practitioner; the Nazis killed tens of thousands of people with disabilities and sterilized hundreds of thousands deemed inferior and medically unfit during the Holocaust. In the Holocaust, 6 million Jewish people were murdered, as well as many other millions of people who were targeted for their political beliefs, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs. These include people of Slavic descent (e.g., Poles, Russians, Ukrainians), Romani people, members of the LGBT community, people that were considered mentally or physically disabled, people with opposing political views (including prisoners of war), Christians, Muslims, people of color, and many others deemed “undesirable” by the Nazi regime.

After World War II and the Holocaust, the American eugenics movement was widely condemned. However, sterilization programs continued in many states until the mid-1970s. In California, researchers are bringing lost histories from this era to light and have uncovered evidence that certain groups of people, including people of African, Indigenous, and Latinx ancestry, were victimized at rates higher than other groups. For more, see “[On a Eugenics Registry: A Record of California’s Thousands of Sterilizations](#)” from *NPR*.

The goal of this lesson is for students to assess and discuss historical documents to deepen their understanding of eugenics and learn from their peers via the classroom activity. pgEd’s companion lesson, “[Genetics, History and the American Eugenics Movement](#)”, gives students the chance to engage in conversations that contrast the dangers of eugenics with the benefits that can come from genetic information and technology. Students will have a chance to debate and discuss the content of these lessons, even though complete consensus about the intersection of genetics and society will be difficult.

This lesson is rich with examples and references; however, it is not a complete picture of the experiences of all the different groups of people and regions targeted by eugenic practices. To explore the wide-ranging impact of the eugenics movement further, we recommend using the “[Eugenics Archive](#)” maintained by Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. Using the search function, you can seek documents specific to your state or geographic area, or more closely examine themes that are pervasive throughout this lesson by using keywords such as “disability,” “poverty,” or “immigration.”

² Stern, Alexandra Minna, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005), p. 84.

Outline of resources and activities in this lesson

1. Part 1 – Analyzing primary sources ([page 6](#))
2. Part 2 – Group presentations ([pages 7](#))
3. Part 3 – Notes for primary sources ([pages 8-11](#))
4. Part 4 – Handouts & Assessments ([page 12](#))
5. Additional Resources & Related Lessons ([page 15](#))

Activities

Analyze primary source document (10-15 minutes), fill out accompanying Analysis Worksheet (10-15 minutes), classroom presentations and discussion (20-30 minutes).

Using Primary Sources to Examine the History of Eugenics

Part 1: ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES (20-30 minutes)

Students can work in pairs or groups of three to complete the activity.

1. Give each group a primary source (either a written document or an image) from the accompanying [printable document](#).
2. Handout either the [Written Document Worksheet](#) or [Image Analysis Worksheet](#) to each group. Students will study/read the primary source and answer the questions to analyze and interpret the meaning of the document. The worksheets are the assessment for the lesson and should be collected by the teacher.

Using Primary Sources to Examine the History of Eugenics

Part 2: GROUP PRESENTATIONS (20-30 minutes)

Have groups share their assigned primary source and explain the main idea or meaning of the document, and what it tells them about the eugenics movement and/or US society at the time. Use the accompanying [PowerPoint slides](#) to project the images to the class as the groups present. [Part 3](#) of this lesson plan has notes for all of the primary sources that are intended as information for the teacher, to help students understand the document, and ensure that their interpretation is correct.

Using Primary Sources to Examine the History of Eugenics

Part 3: NOTES FOR PRIMARY SOURCES

The slide notes below are intended as information for the teacher, to help students understand the document and ensure that their interpretation is correct. Do not hand out the information to students, as they should be analyzing the information using the primary source. The documents give a broad overview of many aspects of the American eugenics movement; however, our lesson "[Genetics, History and the American Eugenics Movement](#)" will give students a deeper historical understanding.

Primary sources notes

Slide 2

This display is from a Midwestern state fair in the United States in the 1920s. Large posters and displays about genetics became common at state fairs during this time, where there was often information about genetics related to animal breeding. The display highlights the idea that people with genetic disorders, or with perceived genetic "weaknesses", were a burden to society. It also promoted the idea that there were people born of "inferior" or "superior" stock. Part of the goal was to promote parents of "good stock" to have large families.

Slide 3

The image on the left, from a state fair, is of a "Better Baby Contest". The contests began as a way to promote health in children and to educate parents about taking care of babies and young children. As the events evolved, children were judged on various categories related to mental and physical development. Criteria could range from height to behavior to stubbiness of fingers. The image on the right is of a prize metal awarded in such a contest. You can learn more [here](#).

Slide 4

This pamphlet for the Kansas Free Fair was produced in 1929 by the American Eugenics Society, which promoted "racial betterment" and eugenic health. The goal of such a pamphlet was to encourage eugenic marriage and mate selection. It also provides insight into some of the misconceptions of eugenicists, including the belief that traits such as feeble-mindedness, criminality, and pauperism were inherited traits.

Slide 5

Published in Germany in 1936, this poster is part of a larger exhibition on race. The goal was to promote “positive” eugenics, encouraging healthy people to reproduce and have large families, under the mistaken assumption that healthy people did not have children with genetic disorders or heritable diseases. This particular poster promotes sterilization in order to prevent the birth of disabled children.

Slide 6

Women were deemed “feeble-minded” and “promiscuous” for a variety of reasons. “Feeble-mindedness” was a vague and wide-ranging designation of people being committed to mental institutions. It included women who gave birth out of wedlock, even if they were victims of rape, and women and girls who were deemed promiscuous and dangerous to the general population. This document showcases the ways in which gender and women’s lack of social and political power at the time were used to designate particular people for sterilization.

Slide 7

Written by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., the 1927 Supreme Court Ruling *Buck v. Bell*, allowed forced sterilization by government agencies such as public health departments. Carrie Buck was the plaintiff in the case. This case established that the state has the right to force a person to be sterilized without his or her consent. While many cases have criticized this ruling, technically, the decision has never been overturned. Carrie Buck was born to a poor mother who was eventually committed to the Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and the Feeble-minded, at which time Carrie was placed in foster care. At the age of 17, Carrie became pregnant as the result of a rape, most likely by the nephew of her foster parents. Her foster parents then committed her to the Virginia State Colony on the grounds of feeble-mindedness, promiscuity and incorrigible behavior.

While at the Colony, Carrie was sterilized to prevent passing along “feeble-mindedness”, which she, her mother and her daughter were all declared to exhibit. Reporters and researchers who later interviewed Carrie described her to be of average intelligence. This excerpt illustrates the idea that people deemed “feeble-minded” were a burden to the state and society, and that it was better to prevent their reproducing than to pay for the problems their theoretical offspring will cause later in life.

The book “*Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck*” by *Adam Cohen, 2016*, explores this case and the larger movement in detail.

Slide 8

This document illustrates the reasons for which people could be sterilized by government agencies in different states. The criteria were unscientific (“moral degenerates”, “idiocy”) and often based on misunderstanding of disease – for example, eugenicists particularly targeted epileptics, as epilepsy, a neurological disorder characterized by unexpected seizures, was poorly understood and feared.

Slide 9

Many leaders of the eugenics movement, including Francis Galton (a scientist and psychologist who coined the term “eugenics” and the phrase “nature vs. nurture”) advocated issuing “eugenic certificates” to people seeking to marry. To obtain a certificate, individuals would need to be examined by a doctor and declared eugenically fit to marry. Although these did not become widespread, some were issued by the government.

Slide 10

[The Black Stork](#) is a 1917 film based on the real-life case of Dr. Harry Haiselden, the chief surgeon at the German-American Hospital in Chicago, and his decision to allow the death of day-old infant John Bollinger, born to “idiocy”. The document on the right is a movie poster advertising the film, while the document on the left is a news article about the case. The case garnered much public debate about doctors’ responsibility to save “defective” babies versus their responsibility to save society from the burden of them.

Slide 11

“Eugenical News” was the main publication of the eugenics movement in the US from 1916 – 1953, published by the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in Cold Spring Harbor, NY. The ERO was a center for genetics and human heredity research that strongly advocated forced sterilization. Its leaders were major advocates for eugenics in the US. This article promotes the so-called advances in sterilization enacted by the Nazi government in Germany in 1933 by passing the “Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring”. Many leading American eugenicists corresponded with and admired German eugenicists, praising their methods as a model for American eugenics.

Slide 12

Supporters of eugenics hold signs to demonstrate which groups and characteristics they believe should be prevented from reproducing.

Slide 13

This poster, part of the series referenced in slide 5, uses the idea of prolific reproduction by people of “inferior stock” to create concern among the public that such “inferior” women must be sterilized before they can create a burden for society.

Slide 14

A key belief among eugenicists was that intelligence was correlated with race and ethnicity. During the early 20th century, intelligence and psychological tests became widespread, and are now recognized as having been culturally biased to favor people of northern European descent. The US Army conducted extensive intelligence testing to assign duties to recruits. The bar graph on the left shows the percentage of men, by ethnicity, who showed “superior or very superior” intelligence.

Slide 15

Eugenicists believed that poverty, called “pauperism” at the time, was caused by the inheritance of “bad genes”. Prior to the 20th century, poor people were typically cared for in their communities by relatives, churches and private charities. By the turn of the 20th century, government-supported welfare programs began to replace the local community support people had received. The idea that poor people and families were a burden to society became more widespread. This form for studying the inheritance of pauperism and criminality demonstrates the connection eugenicists believed existed, exploring type of pauperism, vices, crimes, status of children, etc. The idea was that not only were poverty and criminality linked, but they were also caused in part by “bad genetic stock”.

Slide 16

Many states have created a patients’ bill of rights to ensure proper treatment to people receiving medical care. It may be a law or a set of guidelines. The goal of such bills is to allow people to be fully aware of the risks and benefits of treatment, and to provide their consent to any treatment. This stands in contrast to some medical care during the eugenics era, when patients were often not informed about a procedure they were receiving, or had received, or was performed without their approval and against their wishes.

Using Primary Sources to Examine the History of Eugenics

Part 4: HANDOUTS & ASSESSMENTS

Homework assignment:

The Written Document Worksheet or the Image Analysis Worksheet ([page 13-14](#)) can be used as the assessment for this lesson plan and should be collected by the teacher at the end of the activity. Further, class presentations and the group discussions can be used as the basis for writing a reflective essay.

Using Primary Sources to Examine the History of Eugenics

STUDENT HANDOUT: WRITTEN DOCUMENT WORKSHEET

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Type of Document:
2. Date created (estimate if necessary):
3. Who do you think created the document? (if not a specific person, what group of people?) Who do you think was the intended audience of the document?
4. Explain the main idea of the document:
5. Why was this document written? What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.
6. Explain two things the document tells you about U.S. society at the time it was written.

Using Primary Sources to Examine the History of Eugenics

STUDENT HANDOUT: IMAGE ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Type of Document:
2. Date created (estimate if necessary):
3. Describe in detail what you see in the photograph or poster:
4. Explain the main idea or message of the image:
5. Who do you think was the intended audience for this image?
6. Is this image successful at sending a specific message? Why?

Using Primary Sources to Examine the History of Eugenics

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & RELATED LESSONS

Additional resources for teachers

1. [Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement](#), *Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory*.
2. [Eugenics in the United States](#), *Wikipedia*.
3. [Timeline of the American Eugenics Movement](#), *Facing History and Ourselves*.
4. [Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck](#), by Adam Cohen

Related pgEd lesson plans

[Genetics, History and the American Eugenics Movement](#)
[Genome editing and CRISPR](#)