STUDY PAST TO IMPROVE OUR FUTURE

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Eugenics is the science of genetically improving the human race. Traditionally, it aimed to eliminate traits considered detrimental to society by restricting the reproduction of individuals deemed "unfit." Governments, including the state of North Carolina, used coercive methods, including sterilization, in this campaign to eliminate undesirable traits such as mental retardation and mental illness. In hindsight, we view these attempts at involuntary eugenics as socially and morally wrong.

It is now illegal to discriminate against people based on inborn characteristics such as gender, race or disability. As a society, we have a greater respect for human rights and are more tolerant of diversity within our own culture. Globalization has opened our minds to the influences of other cultures. Past eugenics programs reflected the narrow and biased views of powerful groups who resisted change and sought to maintain their own positions.

In recent years, we also have learned much about the relative importance of nature vs. nurture in human development. The simplistic notion of blaming the individual for social problems is now recognized as misguided. Most experts acknowledge that our most serious social problems, including crime, drug abuse and mental disorders, reflect shortcomings with our institutions. In fact, much of the responsibility for today's problems lies in the declining effectiveness of our schools, churches and families as positive influences on human development.

Now, advances in the life sciences and biotechnology could usher in a new age of eugenics -- one fundamentally different from the 20th-century version. In this new age, scientists will identify genes that control the expression of many traits, ranging from disease susceptibility to height. When this is combined with genetic engineering, it will become increasingly possible to design children. This is an awesome power that must be carefully managed if we are to prevent the problems that arose in earlier eugenics efforts. That is why the debate about apologizing for the past is an ideal opportunity. Taking a critical look at our history with involuntary eugenics will help us begin to grapple with the complex questions raised by the voluntary eugenics that individual parents will be able to practice.

It is already possible to eliminate some inherited disorders. This involves choices individuals make about their reproductive fortunes, through prenatal screening, in-vitro fertilization, abortion and other practices. In the future, we also could be able to enhance complex traits, such as mental health and physical fitness. Initial changes will involve one or two well-characterized genes (and will most likely be for elimination of inherited diseases or defects). Choices will expand to include the selection of desirable traits, not just the elimination of negative ones. Some traits (such as eye color) are controlled by only one or a few genes. Other traits, such as intelligence and athletic ability, are controlled by the interaction of numerous genes, as well as environment.

Who should decide which traits parents should be able to select? Parents have always tried to provide their children with advantages. We don't limit parents' attempts to provide academic enrichment, athletic coaching, improved nutrition or straighter teeth. In fact, social norms encourage it. In some respects, the new eugenics will let parents start this enhancement process earlier. Using modern science to give children the best possible start in life may become expected of "good" parents.

But parents should avoid imposing their own values on children. For example, if parents could somehow give their child the genes for mathematical ability, that might preclude the child from developing an interest in the arts. Children from wealthy families have always had advantages over their less-affluent peers. The new eugenics could promote even greater inequality. We must be careful not to create a socially inferior underclass of non-genetically enhanced children.

Genes are not destiny. The family and social environment play significant roles in shaping a child's personality, interests and aspirations. In fact, with the proper support from social institutions, many of the people ordered sterilized in the past could have gone on to lead productive lives and might also have been able to raise families. We must be careful not to rely too much on scientific theories of heredity to drive our social programs. As with the old eugenics, there may be a tendency to focus too much on individuals while overlooking the needs of society's institutions. Without significant attention to public policies and social values, we may find ourselves creating painful challenges for future generations. Given the rapid pace of science, society needs to address these issues soon.

Decisions will ultimately be influenced by culture, values and power. We need to facilitate the involvement of many stakeholders, including scientists, physicians, religious leaders, sociologists and others. Individuals must educate themselves and consider their own values before making reproductive decisions. We must also own up to and correct problems created by past decisions.

The victims of earlier eugenics efforts deserve an apology at the least. It is just as important to show we have learned lessons about the relationship of science and society. The new eugenics holds profound social, biological and ethical implications. The decisions will get more complex and controversial as science progresses and technology gets more powerful.

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If you would like to learn more about the general topic of eugenics, the main story from the April 15 News and Observer has important background information. It is no longer available for free on their website, but I have a text version that I could send you if you are interested. Also, I have some other references (including a recent review article) if you are really interested.