Eugenics: The Application In Modern Study And Research

Swiss monk called Mendel was the first to observe genetics, and he bred peas of different strains and noted that certain combinations changed the finished product. In primitive societies any deformed children were abandoned and either starved or were ravaged by wild animals. This was an early attempt at eugenics by attempting to eliminate any burdens from the community.

Eugenics: the study of how to arrange reproduction within a human population to increase the occurrence of heritable characteristics regarded as desirable. This idea of eugenics first emerged in 1883 when a respected scholar Sir Francis Galton noted “There is a steady check in an old civilisation upon the fertility of the abler classes: the improvident and unambitious are those who chiefly keep up the breed. So the race gradually deteriorates, becoming in each successive generation less fit for a high civilisation.” (Galton1869). Yet eugenics was only theorised until 1896 when marriage laws were introduced in some American states. These laws prohibited those who were feeble-minded or had epilepsy from marrying. In 1909 America implemented aspects of eugenics and introduced forced sterilisation. Between 1909 to 1979 approximately 70,000 sterilisations occured on individuals thought to be unworthy of having children.

Across the world, Hitler had taken note of the eugenics movement in America and written regarding the topic in Mein Kampf. Hitler had extremely strong views about keeping the Aryan race pure, which to him meant only blue eyed, blonde haired people were acceptable . In 1933 he introduced a law similar to the Americans on forced sterilisation. In the 7 years from 1933 Hitler progressed his extreme views and by 1940 people with mental or physical disabilities were being forcefully euthanised either by gas or by lethal injection. As quoted by Hitler “ The demand that defective people be prevented from propagating equally defective offspring is a demand of the clearest reason and if systematically executed represents the most humane act of mankind.” This quote demonstrates how Hitler believed that by executing certain people he was improving the race. During the war horrific experiments were carried out on Jewish and other minority groups in an attempt to make them more like the ideal German, with one of the main focuses being eye drops capable of turning eyes blue. The majority of people who endured these experiments either died or were forever disabled.

One appealing aspect of eugenics to governments was to reduce the financial burden imposed by the weaker or less able within a community. The more needy or vulnerable individuals were seen as a burden to society. However terms like feeble minded, weak and the racially impure made eugenics more about race or status, which appealed to any underlying racist sentiments within a society. Eugenics was put forward as a financial justification to secure society's future as represented in this quote by a German citizen, “60,000 Reichsmark is what this person suffering from a hereditary defect costs the People's community during his lifetime. Fellow citizen, that is your money too”. (1938, anonymous)

Furthermore, countries wanted a strong population that was “pure” and free of misfits or those who differed. Eugenics seemed like a quick solution. As quoted by a U.S court official, “Society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind....Three generations of

imbeciles are enough.' (Oliver Wendell Holmes, 1927) Similar views were prevalent in German society. Hitler quoted in Mein Kampf. 'The national state . . . must set race in the center of all life. It must take care to keep it pure. It must declare the child to be the most precious treasure of the people. It must see to it that only the healthy beget children." This quote demonstrates how Hitler planned to achieve his vision of a "pure" German race.

During WWII Hitler believed in expanding to make room for his new master race. Should Hitler have not attempted to invade Russia, the outcome of WW2 may have been quite different. One of Hitler's main justifications to invade Russia was because he viewed them as inferior and sub humans, with less desirable heritable characteristics. He believed Russians should be killed or enslaved to make space for his superior race. Hitler's belief in the merit of eugenics was influential in his decision to invade Russia, which ultimately was a significant contributing factor in his defeat. "With Russia smashed, Britain's last hope will be shattered. Germany will then be master of Europe and the Balkans." (Hitler, 1940).

Hitler's racist views were advertised through propaganda and his speeches, and many Jewish people fled and found refuge in Japan. Hitler knew of this and demanded that these Jews be captured and returned to Germany to face punishment. Interestingly Hitler also viewed the Japanese as inferior to his master race. Such sentiment angered the Japanese and although aligned to the Germans, they refused to hand over those Jews who had sought refuge within Japan.

One challenge for eugenics during WWII was the extremely blurred line regarding what was "Jewish" enough for punishment. Jewish people had been living in Germany for a very long time which meant they were integrated into society and as such many Germans had Jewish blood. Decisions were made on a case to case basis and to some Nazi's a quarter Jewish heritage was acceptable but to others it was not. There was no clear cut off for what was "Jewish enough" for punishment.

Eugenics was also not successful during WWII because ethical concerns were raised by brave sections within the German community, questioning the eugenics racial propaganda. Internationally and American governments decided to take action after increasing pressure from Jewish communities and organisations throughout their countries. In 1944 the United States founded the War Refugee Board whose main purpose was to rescue and provide assistance to the Jewish and other minorities targeted by Hitler. In the last year of the war the US saved tens of thousands of lives with these rescue missions.

After the terrible tragedy of WWII in which 11 million Jews and less desirable minorities were killed in concentration camps, one would hope vital lessons have been learnt. Before implementing any aspect of eugenics, the science needs to be carefully investigated and the ethical justification proven to be sound. It is important that we question and challenge views within the community that discriminate on the basis of race, appearance or abilities. Diversity within our communities should be embraced. Dangerous ideas thrive when there is no dissonance within a society. Silence allows hate to thriven as shown in Nazi Germany over WW2.

In our world today many scientists continue to incorporate eugenics in their study and research. An example is Dr He Jiankui who genetically modified embryos in China to be AIDS resistant, producing a huge outcry of protest from around the world. This is clearly eugenics in the modern

world, changing DNA to ensure a baby has certain desirable traits. Potential parents are already able to select embryo sex for IVF to prevent their child having serious sex-linked medical conditions. Cloning is being carried out on animals such as cows to ensure they are disease free and productive. This could theoretically be carried over to humans and in the future you could potentially produce an exact clone of yourself! Hopefully one could select to not replicate your less desirable traits. Humour aside, eugenics continues to be relevant in our society today, and raises many ethical challenges. One can only hope we have learnt from the tragic events enacted over WW2 where eugenics was used as justification for truly horrific outcomes.