

Eugenics

1890s – 1950s

Details

Eugenics was an influential doctrine popular from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Eugenics refers to the philosophy and practice of selective breeding of humans with desirable (or “superior”) hereditary traits. While not discounting the role of environmental factors, it placed considerable emphasis on heredity in shaping an individual’s characteristics. The ideas within eugenics were ableist, classist and racist. Eugenics influenced some laws and policies in the twentieth century that resulted in children being removed from their parents, families and communities, supposedly to ‘improve’ the child by placing them in more ‘moral’ and ‘healthy’ environments.

Eugenics was a pseudo-scientific social movement based on distorted beliefs about ‘fit’ and ‘unfit’ people. Eugenics influenced policies and practices towards people with disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities. Eugenicians believed that they could breed out mental deficiency by segregating and sterilising the ‘unfit’.

Eugenics emphasised the superiority of the white race. Its advocates believed that in order for white people to maintain their dominance in the world, governments should intervene to promote the physical fitness of white children.

According to Christina Gillgren (1996), eugenicists held three beliefs that influenced their practices and the policies they tried to implement in Western Australia in the twentieth century:

- Poverty, crime and ‘mental deficiency’ were linked
- Healthy living and the encouragement of good breeding could restore the social balance
- The ‘unfit’ should be stopped from breeding through ‘locating, then registering, and finally segregating or sterilising them’ (Gillgren, p.65).

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Gallery



Eugenics is the self direction of human evolution

Description: This is a copy of an image produced by the American Philosophical Society, titled 'Eugenics is the self direction of human evolution'. It depicts a tree with roots, labelled with many different scientific fields, such as Genealogy, Genetics and Psychology. The caption reads "Like a tree, eugenics draws its materials from many sources and organizes them into an harmonious entity".

More info

Related Entries

Related Events

- [Select Committee to inquire into the management of the Claremont Hospital for the Insane, Western Australia \(24 September 1919 - 11 November 1919\)](#)
- [Royal Commission in Lunacy, State of Western Australia \(28 September 1921 - 21 September 1922\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Hopewood \(1944 - 1970\)](#)

Related Legislation

- [Mental Deficiency Act 1920, Tasmania \(1920 - 1963\)](#)

Resources

- Parry, Naomi, ['Such a longing': black and white children in welfare in New South Wales and Tasmania, 1880-1940](#), 2007
- Ambery, Deborah, [A design for better living : the bio-politics of eugenics, diet and childhood in the Hopewood Experiment of L. O. Bailey](#), 2000
- Birch, Tony, [Framing Fitzroy: contesting and \(De\)constructing place and identity in a Melbourne suburb](#), 2002
- Wyndham, Diana H, [Striving for national fitness: eugenics in Australia 1910s to 1930s](#), July 1996
- Evans, Caroline and Parry, Naomi, [Vessels of Progressivism? Tasmanian State Girls and Eugenics, 1900-1940](#), Australian Historical Studies, 2001
- Rodwell, Grant, ['If the feeble-minded are to be preserved': special education and eugenics in Tasmania, 1900-1930](#), Issues in educational research, 1998
- Ellis, A.S., [Eloquent Testimony : the Story of the Mental Health Services in Western Australia, 1830-1975](#), 1984
- [Menace of tainted human stock](#), The West Australian, 5 September 1950
- [Four out of five Perth people agree with Bishop Barnes](#), The Daily News, 7 September 1950

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