individuals diagnosed with mental retardation, psychiatric symptoms, epilepsy, or deafness, and people considered to be of low moral stature—unwed mothers, thieves, and prostitutes, for such behaviors were thought to be genetically based. A number of states enacted miscegenation laws that prohibited marriage between people of different races because it was believed that mixing the genes of different races would allow undesirable traits to proliferate in the dominant population. In an attempt to keep the “unfit” from procreating, legislators passed compulsory sterilization laws. Indiana was the first state to pass such legislation in 1907; by 1932, thirty states had similar laws. Prior to these statutes, however, compulsory sterilization had been an accepted practice in parts of the Midwest, and by the end of the eugenics movement, approximately 20,000 people had been sterilized.

In one particularly noteworthy case, the state of Virginia had ordered that Carrie Buck, an allegedly retarded woman, be sterilized against her will. Later, Buck sued the state in a case that ultimately went to the Supreme Court. With a single dissenting vote, the Court upheld the existing sterilization laws, with Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes handing down the opinion that it would be better to sterilize a feebleminded woman than to allow her to bear children who would ultimately become thieves and murderers. Recent investigations have revealed that Carrie Buck was completely normal intellectually, as was a daughter—conceived before the sterilization in a case of rape—who, before her death at the age of eight, performed quite satisfactorily in school. The daughter, Vivian Dobbs, had been diagnosed as retarded at six months of age during a cursory examination by a social worker.

In some cases, mental retardation was diagnosed on the basis of intelligence test scores. One prominent psychologist, Henry H. Goddard (1866-1957) actively campaigned to keep mentally retarded individuals from having children, and segregated students living at the New Jersey Vineland Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys by sex so that they could not procreate. Goddard also worked to keep “defective” immigrants from entering the United States. In one instance, he used Alfred Binet’s intelligence test to assess 35 Jews, 22 Hungarians, 50 Italians, and 45 Russians at Ellis Island in New York as they entered the country, and concluded that on average, over 80 percent of the immigrants scored so low as to be reflective of mental retardation. In this case, low test scores are not surprising given that the immigrants were tested in a language foreign to them (English), were probably intimidated by the testing situation, and were unfamiliar with American culture. Subsequent immigration laws included provisions relating to the intelligence quotients of potential immigrants.

Many of the tenets of the American eugenics movement were initially promulgated by the American Breeder’s Association. While reputable scientific research did not support many of the ideas of the eugenicists, they did attempt to invoke science as the foundation for their ideas. The “research” employed was often regarded as low quality by the top scientists of the day, and its “findings” were considered flawed. In fact, Goddard’s discredited research involving the famous lineage of the Kallikak family is now regarded as an example of poorly conceived and biased science.

American eugenics laws were widely supported up until World War II, when evidence of atrocities committed at Nazi death camps were publicized. The eugenics movement can be seen as more a socially than a scientifically based enterprise; only when the malignant implications of eugenics became clear did the American public withdraw its support.

See also Heredity; Jukes family; Nature-nurture controversy

Further Reading

Existential psychology

A system in psychology focused on the belief that the essence of humans is their existence.

Existential psychology is an approach to psychology and psychotherapy that is based on several premises, including: understanding that a “whole” person is more than the sum of his or her parts; understanding people by examining their interpersonal relationships, understanding that people have many levels of self-awareness that can be neither ignored nor put into an abstract context, understanding that people have free will and are participants rather than observers in their own lives, and understanding that people’s lives have purpose, values, and meaning. Therapists who practice existential psychology treat their clients by submerging themselves in the client’s world. For the therapist, therapy is a process in which they, too, are participating.
This is a process that seeks meaning within the whole of the person’s existence, including the client’s personal history.

An important distinction exists between the concept of existentialism and existential phenomenology, even if the two are often linked to one another. According to a leading existential psychologists, Swiss Psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger, “...while the existential therapist enters into the phenomena present before and with him or her, existentialism does not confine itself to states of withness. It includes the existence of the whole being.” In other words, existential therapists are concerned with the whole of their clients as they can experience with them, whereas existential phenomenology studies the whole being—that which can be experienced as well as that which cannot. Binswanger formulated his belief around three different aspects of human existence. These included the Umwelt, or “world around,” meaning the biological drive natural to humans; Mitselt, or “with world;” the social and interpersonal human relationships; and the Eigenwelt, or “own world,” the subjective, phenomenological world of the self.

**History of the movement**

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813–55) is commonly referred to as the “Father of Existentialism.” Kierkegaard stated, “I exist, therefore I think,” in contrast to philosopher Rene Descartes’s famous words, “I think, therefore I am.” This simple statement influenced an entire group of European philosophers and psychologists, changing their approach to treatment. Kierkegaard’s philosophy was not as readily accepted in the United States. Rollo May (1909–94), the American psychologist who would become one of the existential movement’s biggest proponents, attributed the introduction of the existentialist idea in the United States to the famed psychologist and philosopher, William James. James was an advocate of the principle of free will, a crucial component in existential thought. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, existentialism was being quietly introduced, primarily in university classrooms. May himself was introduced to the idea through Paul Tillich at the Union Theological Seminary in New York where he was studying to be a Congregationalist minister. Noted professionals such as Viktor Frankl (1905–97) were beginning to introduce existentialism to the world through their writings and lectures. Frankl had survived internment at the Nazi death camp Theresienstadt and wrote personally of the events that shaped his beliefs. It was not until May and fellow psychologists Abraham Maslow and Herman Feifel participated in the American Psychological Association (APA) Symposium on Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy on September 5, 1959, that the idea of existential psychology and its terms began to reach the forefront of psychological thought and practice.

After the symposium, the term existentialism had become one of the “buzz” words of psychology in the 1960s. May described the existential approach to psychotherapy by stating that the task of therapy was to understand the patient fully as that patient truly exists. Such therapy would require a commitment on the part of the patients to fully understand the lives they were living, or the lives in which they were existing.

In addition to its significance as a major system of psychological practice, existentialism represented an awareness that emerged following World War II, particularly with the Baby Boomer generation. No longer were such philosophical concepts as existentialism left to the private halls of universities. For example, May’s book Love and Will remained on U.S. lists of bestsellers for over four months, indicating that a new age of people from various educational backgrounds were ready to look into themselves as only a few had done in the preceding decades. Self-help books also lined bookstore shelves, an indication of the willingness of people to explore deep into their own existence.

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**Further Reading**


**Further Information**

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