

Regional

O'Brien studies the origins of the "moron"

The study of human disability has taken on a broad meaning in recent years, but its significance in history – as both a health and political issue – is undeniable. Someone who has been looking at this subject is Gerald O'Brien, a professor in the department of social work at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Born in Hazelwood, Mo., O'Brien obtained his bachelor's and master's degrees in social work from the University of Missouri and his doctorate in social work from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. O'Brien is particularly interested in social justice and in looking at how people with disabilities have been treated over time. He recently published a book titled, "Framing the Moron: The Social Construction of Feeble-Mindedness in the American Eugenic Era."

"Eugenics is controlled human breeding," O'Brien explained. "It relates to any public policy that fosters demographics in one way or another, especially by either encouraging 'fit members of society' to breed or discouraging 'unfit persons' from reproducing. Obviously people think of eugenics in terms of the Nazi programs, but we (Americans) were very involved in it."

After the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's law of heredity in 1900, the eugenics movement took on the utopian dream of making better societies by controlling human breeding via laws and policies. Although the Nazis took this idea to its worst extreme, American society began implementing laws that led to the sterilization of tens of thousands of people classified as "morons."

"We couldn't really do anything, nobody could do anything internationally against these sterilization policies because we were doing the same thing and another nations were too," O'Brien said. "The problem with the term moron, coined in 1910 by a eugenicist named Henry Goddard, is that it was created specifically to kind of pull out that group of individuals who were presumably feeble-minded."

The problem not only involved the obvious moral issue of forced sterilization, but also that the measure of intelligence used was scientifically flawed because of the use



Photo by Lauren Brandt

Dr. Gerald O'Brien, center, with some of his students of Social Work.

of culturally biased IQ tests.

"When the Immigration Act was passed, one of the rationales was that very large percentages of immigrants were 'morons' and these classifications were based on a very culturally specific test," O'Brien said. "These folks had lived in rural populations and non-Western societies in many cases, and were being asked questions about United States' products and cultural issues." But there was a social component to these laws.

"Those policies to a large extent tried to diminish the breeding among poverty-stricken populations," O'Brien said. "To a large extent we view them as intelligence-based, but they are really poverty-based. One of the reasons that people eventually turned away from the eugenics movement in the U.S. is because it became quite obvious that it was a movement against the poor classes." There were those, according to O'Brien, who proposed eugenic practices in a different direction, the so-called

"positive eugenics."

"An example of that was Alexander Graham Bell," O'Brien said. "Bell was an important early eugenicist. His wife was deaf and one of the things that Bell argued was that individuals who were deaf should marry hearing persons because hearing was basically the dominant gene and would take over. He was very opposed to segregation of individuals who were deaf into separate institutions. He said that if deaf individuals married deaf individuals,

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they would have deaf children."

With today's advances in genetics come new issues, such as the possibility of producing "boutique babies" modeled on their parents' wishes.

"Many people argue that this is not eugenics in the historical sense because these are individual decisions that parents may make," O'Brien said. "They are not government decisions that you are being imposed with. One of the problems from the disability standpoint is that there are valid concerns that if individuals are pressured to, say, abort children that may be disabled with Down syndrome, then that's problematic. One issue is that those cultural pressures are very similar to government pressures." When O'Brien presents these complex issues to his students he said that he oftentimes gets conflicting reactions.

"I try to give free reign to various opinions," he said. "I understand that different people have different perspectives. I think that for me, the discussion is what's most important in terms of getting back to the genetic technologies and the possibility of genetic testing with abortion. It's very difficult to tell parents, and if you have been in that situation one might argue that you shouldn't tell parents that they shouldn't make a decision one way or another. These are extraordinarily complex issues." Have we as a society really learned from the horrors of the eugenics movement?

"I ask myself that a lot," O'Brien said. "I'm not sure what we have learned. Oftentimes, it seems like we repeat our mistakes. I would like to think that one of the things we have learned is that we have to be very cautious of judgments."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.