

White supremacy—the dark side of eugenics

September 22 2017, by Ricki Lewis



Credit: NHGRI

Whenever I work on a new edition of my human genetics textbook and reach the section on eugenics, at the end of an evolution chapter, I'm relieved that it's history. But this summer, as I wrapped up the 12th edition, the eugenics coverage took on a frightening new reality.

Today's resurging white nationalism/supremacy echoes the century-old idea that a self-appointed group that perceives itself as superior can "improve" a human population through selective breeding or actions taken against individuals judged to be inferior. Theodore Lothrop Stoddard, identified in Wikipedia as an historian but also a eugenicist and Klansman, laid out his ideas in the 1920 book "[The Threat Against White World Supremacy: The Rising Tide of Color](#)."

It's easy to see why "white nationalism" and "white supremacy" are used [interchangeably](#). [Merriam-Webster](#) defines a "white nationalist" as "one of a group of militant whites who espouse white supremacy and advocate enforced racial segregation." A "white supremacist" is "a person who believes that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that [white people](#) should have control over people of other races."

So the supremacists take the scope farther, but I'll use the terms synonymously. It's all hate.

"White" unites the two terms; a Kenyan or Swedish nationalist would be a proponent of those nations. While taking the terms literally – rejecting people based on a single inherited trait out of our many thousands—is scientifically absurd, white supremacists ideologically link other perceived faults to that most obvious manifestation.

A brief history of eugenics

[Sir Francis Galton](#) coined the term "eugenics," meaning "good in birth," in 1883, defining it as "the science of improvement of the human race germplasm through better breeding." In 1930, Sir Ronald Aylmer Fisher, another pale Brit, embellished Galton's ideas by suggesting that governments reward high-income families when they have children, to encourage the passing on of the prized germplasm.

American botanist Luther Burbank entered the discussion in 1906 with his book ["The Training of the Human Plant."](#) Burbank appreciated the value of diversity at the start of a eugenics program, even acknowledging the importance of immigration to seed that diversity, but seems to confuse populations, races, and species:

"I have constantly been impressed with the similarity between the organization and development of plant and human life. ... I have come to find in the crossing of species and in selection, wisely directed, a great and powerful instrument for the transformation of the vegetable kingdom along lines that lead constantly upward. The crossing of species is to me paramount. Upon it, wisely directed and accompanied by a rigid selection of the best and as rigid an exclusion of the poorest, rests the hope of all progress. The mere crossing of species, unaccompanied by selection, wise supervision, intelligent care, and the utmost patience, is not likely to result in marked good, and may result in vast harm. ... let me lay emphasis on the opportunity now presented in the United States for observing and, if we are wise, aiding in what I think it fair to say is the grandest opportunity ever presented of developing the finest race the world has ever known out of the vast mingling of races brought here by immigration."

The eugenic movement in the U.S. officially began in 1910, when Charles Davenport established the [Eugenics Record Office](#) at Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island. His team compiled data from all manner of institutions that warehoused the feeble-minded, criminal, promiscuous, or socially dependent, and attributed their diagnoses to single genes, well before anyone knew what a gene even was.

Interest in eugenics persisted. One notorious case took place, ironically given the white supremacist confrontation this summer, in Charlottesville, 90 years ago. Seventeen-year-old Carrie Buck was tried

for having a mother who lived in an asylum for the feeble-minded and for daring to have a similarly impaired daughter following rape. Carrie was herself deemed "feeble-minded," despite being a B student, leading Sir Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. to famously rule, "three generations of imbeciles are enough." Carrie became the first person sterilized to prevent future births of "socially inadequate offspring."

And then came the Nazis, with their own version of controlled breeding that took negative as well as positive turns.

The 1933 Nazi "[Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring](#)," aka the "Sterilisation law," established Genetic Health Courts to prevent people with any of several vague conditions, only a few of which are actually inherited, from having children. Two years later the [Lebensborn program](#) placed the offspring of single women impregnated by the SS into Aryan households, and did the same for blond, blue-eyed orphans.

But the Nazis were picky. Acceptable whites came from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Unacceptable were those from Jewish, ethnic Pole, Slavic, or Roma ancestry. Nor were people of [African ancestry](#) included among the cherished, but they were not exterminated en masse.

The underlying assumption of the Nazis: Aryan genetic material is the best. The mechanism of perpetuating it: selective breeding. The Nazi "science" focused on selection, ignoring mutation, which happens in any DNA. It also steadfastly ignored the upped odds of recessive disease that come with [endogamy](#)—marrying within a group.

Silencing Stormfront

The state of our knowledge of genetics today makes white supremacist

ideology even more offensive than early eugenic thinking. And that takes me to events of this past summer.

In mid-August, in the wake of the tragic rally in Charlottesville, [STAT News](#) and other high-profile media reported on a meeting in Montreal at which two sociologists described their investigation of the reactions of white supremacists to genetic ancestry testing results that indicated that they weren't as "pure" as they'd thought. I awaited the full report, media coverage being somewhat short on detail.

I spent the final weekend of August reading the tome from Aaron Panofsky and Joan Donovan, sociologists from UCLA. That sucked me into Stormfront, the online community source for their many intriguing quotes. I could only read it in small doses, but noted posts indicating a good grasp of genetics.

My analysis, "Memo To White Nationalists From A Geneticist: Why White Purity Is A Terrible Idea," was published online at [Science Trends](#). I pulled the most alarming quotes from the Stormfronters, analyzed when they were accurate and not, pointed out the flaws and assumptions of DNA ancestry testing and interpretation, and reviewed the genetics behind skin color.

I planned to write another article, using a different set of Stormfront remarks, here for my weekly DNA Science post. I'd blog when the President's false equivalency of white supremacy with people protesting their hatred re-emerged. And of course it did, our tweeting leader perhaps resentful of sharing the spotlight with hurricanes.

So a few days ago, I clicked on Stormfront to find some ripe new examples of neo-Nazi-speak for this week's post.

Denied!

(Not to worry, the American Nazi Party is the place to go for those with less melanin panicking over the fact that by 2055, most of the US citizenry won't be white.)

I tried sneaking in to Stormfront through Wikipedia, where I discovered:

"Stormfront was a white nationalist, white supremacist and neo-Nazi Internet forum, and the Web's first major racial hate site. ... In August 2017, Stormfront's registrar seized its domain name due to complaints that it promoted hatred and that some of its members were linked to murder."

Not surprisingly, judging by the tiki-torch-holders in Charlottesville not even ashamed enough to hide behind white hoods, Stormfront traffic had surged since the 2016 election season and the presence of those who might support white supremacy ensconced in the White House. Genetic testing became a hot topic.

Stormfront vanished on August 29, 2017.

My "Memo to White Nationalists From a Geneticist" appeared August 28, 2017.

Coincidence? Most likely.

But I'd like to believe that my article helped to bury this meeting ground of hate.

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Citation: White supremacy—the dark side of eugenics (2017, September 22) retrieved 9 April

2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-white-supremacythe-dark-side-eugenics.html>

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