The Epistemic Responsibility of 1930s Eugenicists: What the Trial of Ann Cooper Hewitt Shows about Modern Disinformation Discourse

Socialite Ann Cooper Hewitt took her mother to court for sterilizing her without consent for being feebleminded. Eugenicists Popenoe and Gosney's involvement contributed to Ann's legal loss.

# Definitions

- 1. Disinformation: false information spread with the intent to harm.
- Epistemic responsibility: behaving according to evidence, not personal motives.
- 3. Eugenics: a false scientific concept
  about controlling genetics to better
  the human race.

# Why it matters

- Expands emerging field of disinformation by incorporating epistemology
- Helps make debates today about disinformation and bodily autonomy feel less singular and unsurmountable



PRESENTER: Lia Richter





# Eugenicists' behavior during the trial is a key example of how epistemic responsibility intersects with modern day disinformation

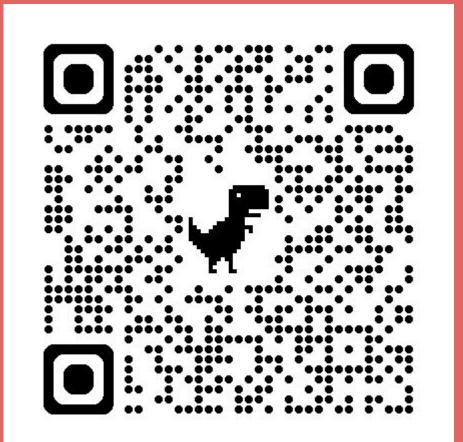
Paul Popenoe

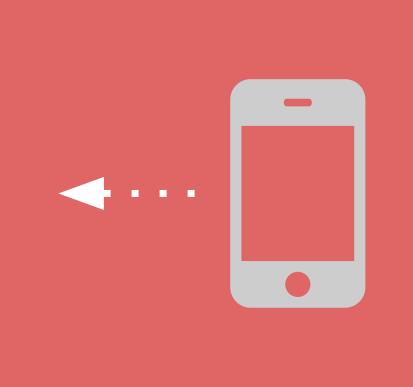
Ann Cooper Hewitt (left) Maryon Hev



HEIRESS IN STERILIZATION SUIT-Miss Ann Cooper Hewitt, 21-year-old heiress who charged her mother, Mrs. Maryon Hewitt McCarter, of having her sterilized to obtain control of a \$10,000,-000 estate, is pictured above, as she entered her \$500,000 damage suit. During her lifetime, Miss Hewitt was to receive two-thirds of the estate income, with one-third to go to the mother. In the event that no children were born to the daughter, her two-thirds share was to pass to her mother on death of the daughter. Mrs. McCarter was quoted as saying her daughter had been sterilized

# It's necessary to integrate epistemic concepts in the field when analyzing historical case studies.





#### Maryon Hewitt McCarter (right)

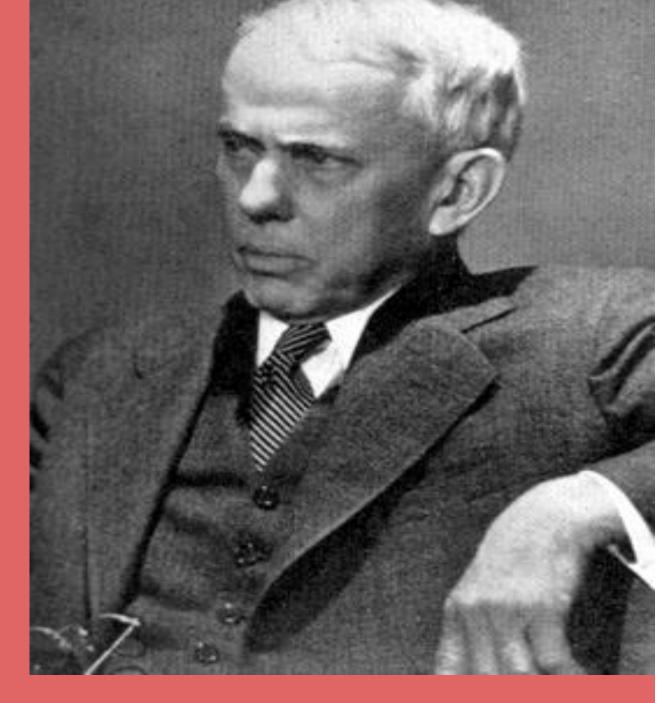


Mrs. McCarter.

at the time of his marriage and Maryon claimed he had coss her \$50,000 a year for support. She told some interesting stories about their financial relations. One was that he had asked for a diamond anklet for himself, costing \$100,-000. He didn't get it. She said she paid out a million on him. She also lost her citizenship through the marriage. Maryon got her divorce in Parls

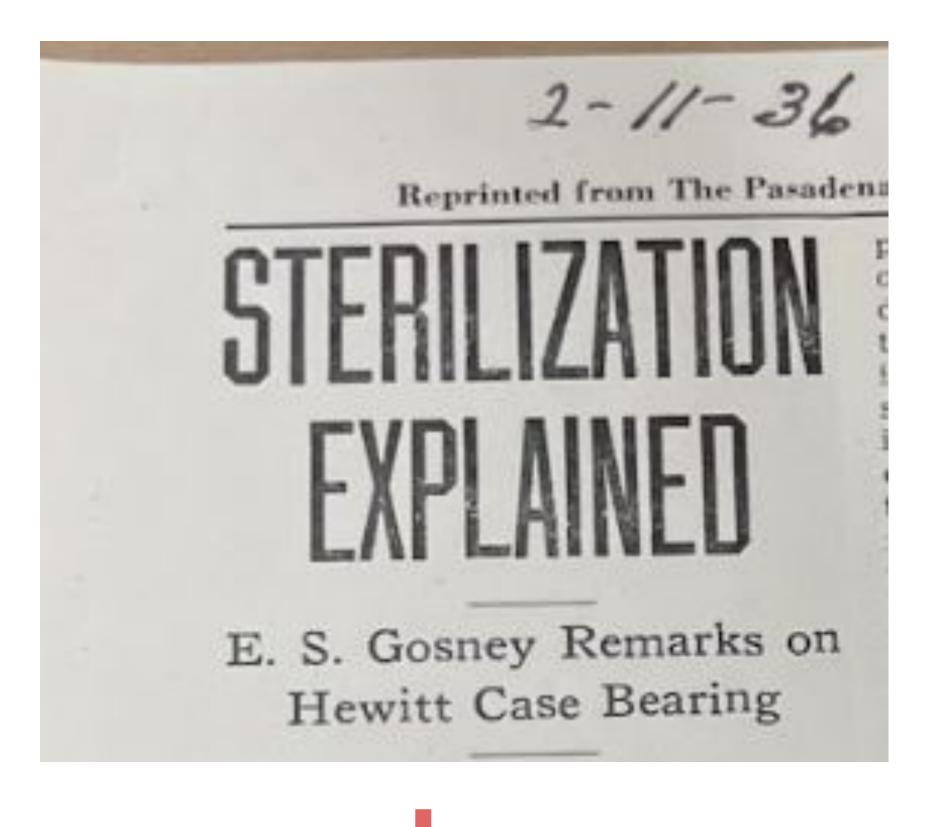
in 1925. She took time out to beat the living members of the Hewitt family in court when they tried to prove that Daughter Ann was illegitimate. She, it will be recalled, was born four years before Maryon and Hewitt married. The court ruled that by the marriage Ann's birth was legitimized.

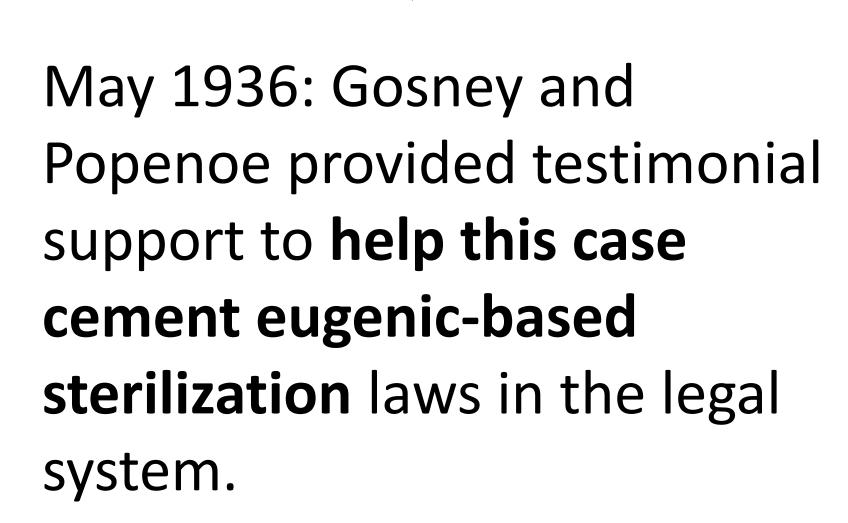
That item disposed of, Maryon wed W. C. McCarter, brilliant New Jersey lawyer and son of the



Ezra S. Gosney

Take a picture to download the full paper Feb 11, 1936: "Relations
between mother and daughter"
has nothing to do with
eugenics.





# What changed their position?

Winning this case could protect their positions from backlash to eugenics. **Ignoring evidence about Ann helped their personal motives.** 

REFERENCES

Social Welfare Archive, Audrey Clare Farley, Wendy Kline, Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, Heidi Grasswick, Bennett L. Livingstone, and more.