

The Epistemic Responsibility of 1930s Eugenacists: 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 feeble-minded. Eugenacists Popenoe and Gosney's involvement contributed to Ann's legal loss.

Definitions

1. **Disinformation:** false information spread with the intent to harm.
2. **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



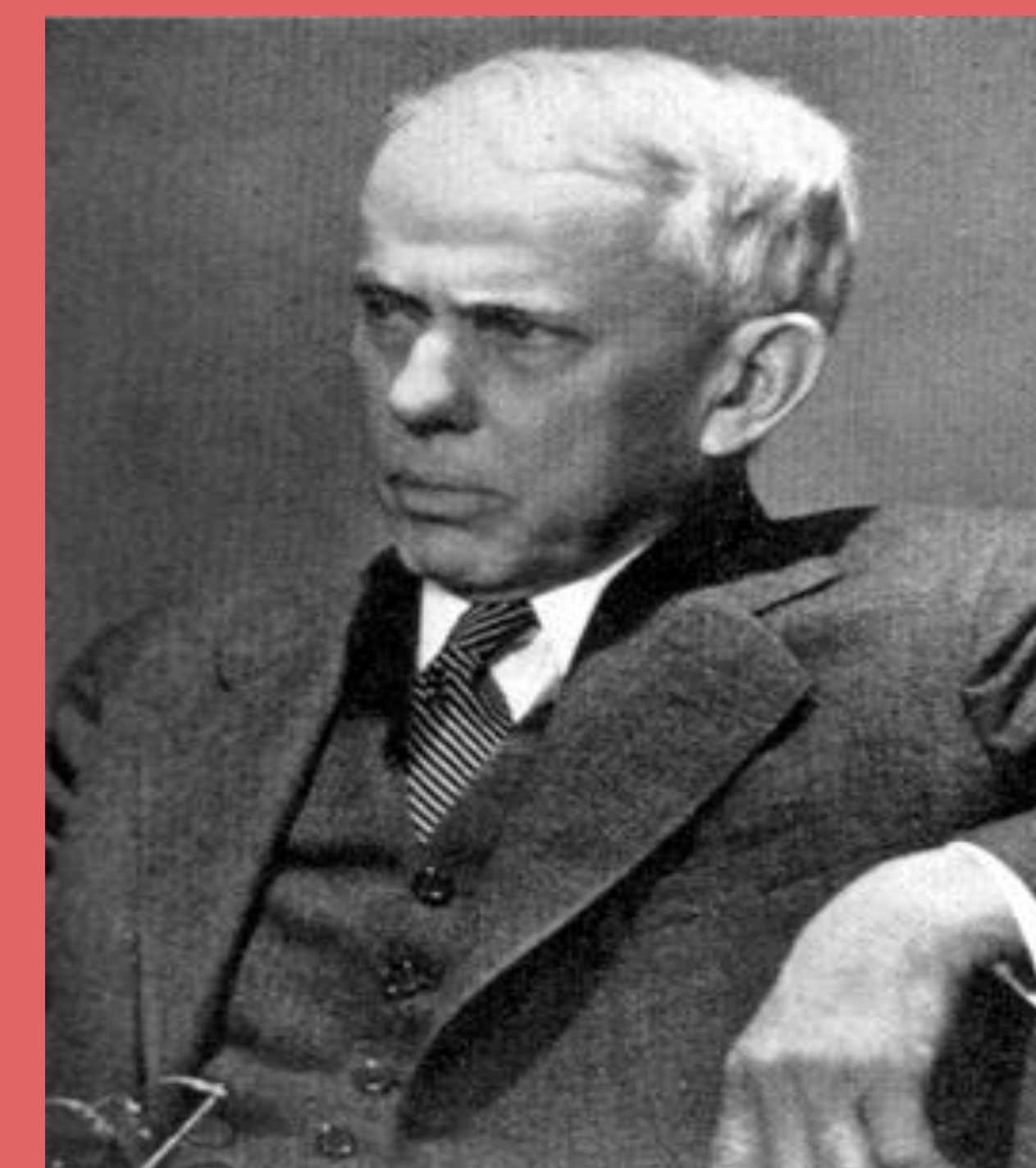
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Eugenacists' behavior during the trial is a key example of how epistemic responsibility intersects with modern day disinformation



Paul Popenoe

Ann Cooper Hewitt (left)
Maryon Hewitt McCarter (right)



Ezra S. Gosney

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

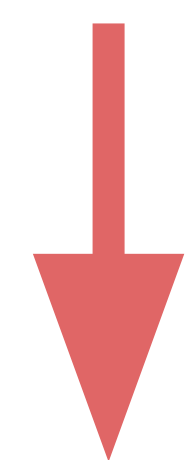
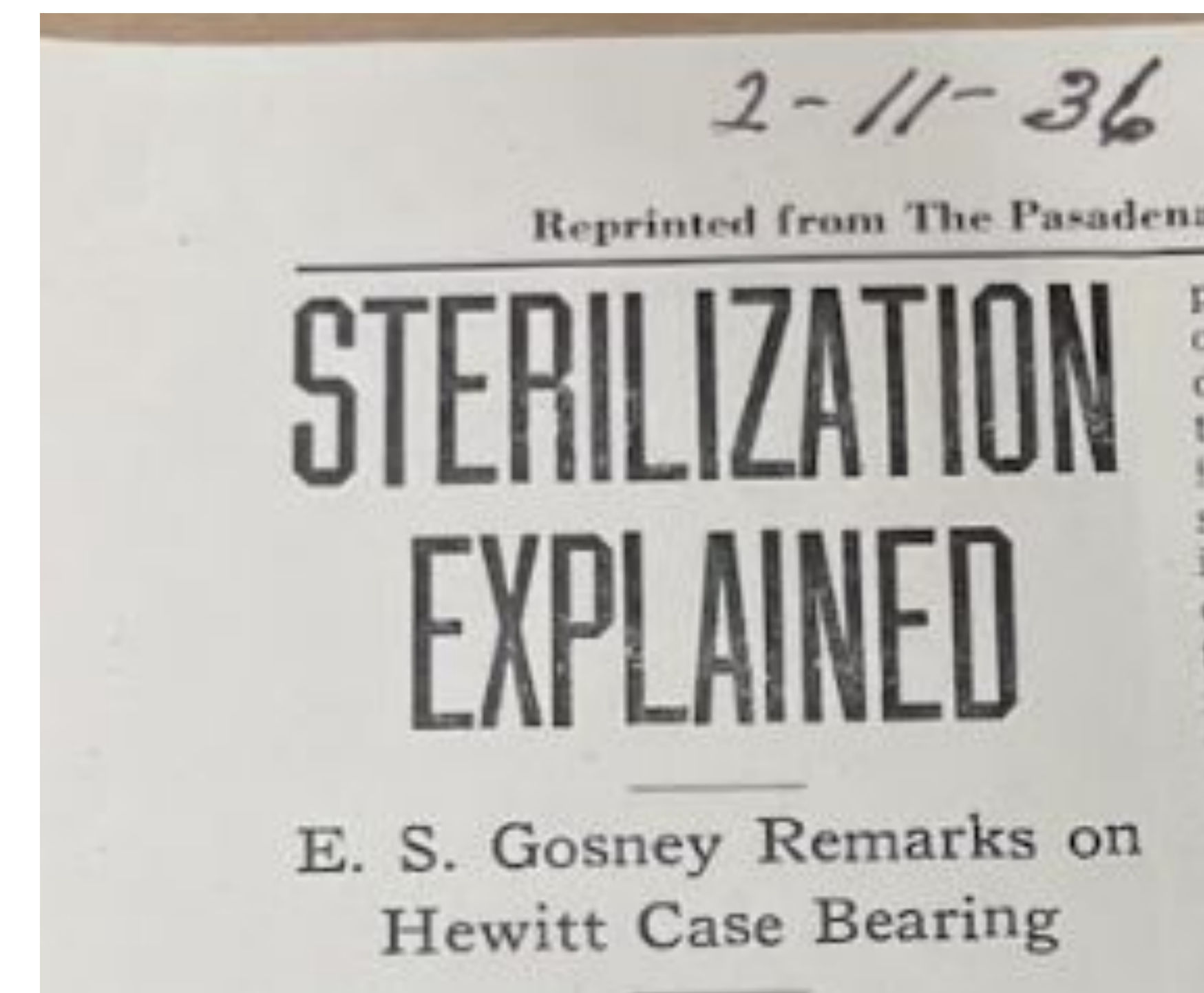


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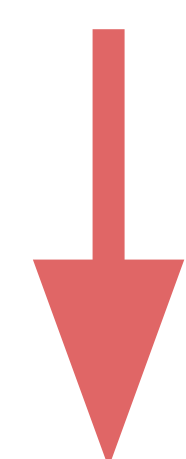
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Feb 11, 1936: "Relations between mother and daughter" has nothing to do with eugenics.



May 1936: Gosney and Popenoe provided testimonial support to **help this case cement eugenic-based sterilization laws** in the legal system.

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.