



# DISCUSSION GUIDE

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## Discussion Guide for “*Vermont for the Vermonters*”: *The History of Eugenics in the Green Mountain State* By Mercedes de Guardiola

Eugenics is a pseudo-scientific field of selective human breeding. Founded in 1883 by Sir Francis Galton, a half-cousin of Charles Darwin, the field rose to prominence by the early 1900s in Great Britain and internationally, later becoming the foundation of Nazi Germany. The field was never unique or new: Galton drew upon longstanding beliefs that certain people were superior to others, particularly on the basis of socioeconomic class, race and ethnicity, and mental and physical ability. As eugenics was reinvented following World War II, it is difficult to determine the end or evolution of this field today.

Vermont did not escape the spread of eugenic ideas. Eugenecists in the state targeted certain groups, communities, and individuals as “degenerate” and “feeble-minded,” actively working to eradicate family lines through marriage restrictions, institutionalization, and sterilization while educating “desirable” Vermonters on how to strengthen their family lines. As individuals and citizens in community with one another, we must be willing to grapple with the hardest parts of our collective history. A deeper understanding of a difficult past, with wider contextual consideration, provides us with the ability to actively invest in an improved future for all.

Mercedes de Guardiola’s book “*Vermont for the Vermonters*”: *The History of Eugenics in the Green Mountain State* provides a conduit for just this type of engagement. Through extensive research and scholarship, de Guardiola explores the social and political legacy of the eugenics movement in Vermont specifically. Linking Vermont’s historic eugenics policy and program decisions to their lasting effects and impacts, this book uncovers the targeted, systematic actions taken against Vermont’s most vulnerable people.

It is important to note that individuals and communities today have a direct connection to topics and events mentioned in the book. Therefore, it is vital to approach conversations with respect and sensitivity to the fact that there are individuals for whom this history is lived.

This Discussion Guide contains different resource sections to provide the best engagement points that you could use in discussing this book with a variety of audiences:

- **Discussing the Book by Chapter** offers discussion questions organized by sections of the book. This section may be most helpful for use in the classroom or in book groups.
- **Discussing the Book in Your Community** offers prompts and resources to help guide wider community discussions about the book and this difficult history. This section may be most useful for historical societies, libraries, or community groups hosting discussions about the book.
- **Moderating Difficult Discussions** offers guidelines for tackling complex and potentially problematic and/or traumatic discussions. This section may be most useful for group moderators and discussion leaders.

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## SECTION 1: DISCUSSING THE BOOK BY CHAPTER

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This chapter discussion guide aims to provide groups with a starting point for meaningful conversations on each section of the book. It is directed at readers at a 9th-grade reading level, but can be used for a variety of high school and adult learning groups.

### Part I: Weeds in the Seed-bed: The Beginnings of the Vermont Eugenics Movement

#### I. *Old Ideals, New Realities*

1. Vermont's landscape and history have been mythologized since the state was formed. How can idealization of the past contribute to harmful thinking?
2. What were the claims made about the "old stock"? Did the "old stock" exist in Vermont?
3. How did public assistance work in Vermont in the 1800s?
4. How did increasing industrialization in Vermont and other New England states affect Vermont farmers?
5. What historical events contributed to the rise of mass institutionalization in the 1800s?

#### II. *Mead's Eugenics Campaign*

1. Words like "imbecile," "feeble-minded," and "idiot" are used as insults, but during the eugenics movement these words were used to categorize people. Does continued use of these terms perpetuate eugenical ideas?
2. What were Mead's arguments? Did they have any sway in the bill that was passed?
3. How did Mead draw from other states to draft his speech?
4. Look at the image on page 24. What are some of the things listed as the "roots" of eugenics? How did eugenics draw from these fields?
5. Why was the 1912 eugenics bill defeated?

### Part II: Segregation or Sterilization: From the 1912 Legislature to the Rise of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont

#### III. *A State in Crisis*

1. Vermont relies on an image of rural idealization to drive tourism today; how does this still have an impact on the lived experiences of Vermonters?
2. What types of public programs were created in the 1910s to help children and mothers? How well did they work? What were their weaknesses?

3. How did eugenicists use bias to manipulate their data?
4. How did the second resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in Vermont and in the United States draw upon eugenics?
5. “One Vermonter recalled to a family member how fun it was to burn a cross ... a victim later recounted such an incident [and] ‘felt sure they were coming after me’” (p. 51). How can oral histories and interviews help us understand the day-to-day impact of domestic terrorism?

#### IV. *The Mass Institutionalization Era*

1. This book does not use the words “patient” or “victim” to describe people involuntarily affected by the Vermont eugenics movement. Do you agree with the author’s decision?
2. How were the three state-run institutions similar? What were their differences?
3. Many people targeted by the eugenics movement were institutionalized at an early age and kept in state facilities well into adulthood. How could this impact social development?
4. What other historical events impacted overcrowding in state-run institutions from the 1920s through the 1930s?
5. What does the case study on Martha and Sarah’s family show about record-keeping practices during the eugenics movement? How could these practices impact our research of eugenics today?

### **Part III: Lessons from a Eugenical Survey of Vermont: The Eugenics Survey of Vermont and the Vermont Commission on Country Life**

#### V. *The Eugenics Survey of Vermont*

1. Who was Henry Perkins? How may his fields of study have impacted his understanding of and support for eugenics?
2. How did the benefactors and researchers of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont use their own genealogy to justify their actions?
3. Many fieldworkers for the Eugenics Survey of Vermont were college-educated white women who supported progressive policies. Why may they have chosen to work on the Survey?
4. What was the stated intention of the Eugenics Survey? How does bias influence the Survey’s targeted goals?
5. The Eugenics Survey of Vermont was a private organization with funding from partners. As such, state-funded institutions in Vermont had no legal obligation to provide this organization with their records. Why did they collaborate with the Survey?

## VI. *The Successes of the Eugenics Survey*

1. How did the Eugenics Survey of Vermont measure success?
2. The Eugenics Survey workers violated the rights of the families they studied in multiple ways. How can negative experiences like this build intergenerational mistrust with medical systems?
3. What was the purpose of the Vermont Commission on Country Life (VCCL)? How did it differ from the Eugenics Survey?
4. How did the anti-eugenics movement combat the sterilization bill?
5. What did Perkins believe about birth control? How may this differ from birth control advocacy today?

## VII. *Targeted Investigations of Vermonters*

1. Who was targeted by the Eugenics Survey's family studies? Why were these groups of people targeted?
2. How did socioeconomic status influence how Vermont eugenicists defined the "old stock" and "degenerates"?
3. Why was the Kallikak family (pp. 123-124) study favored by eugenicists? How did the study define both sets of Kallikak's descendants?
4. How does the mixture of neutral surnames like "Dolittle" and derogatory names like "Pirate" and "Gypsy" affect how people might see the seven groups described in the Eugenics Survey's family studies?
5. How can a researcher's bias affect the work of science?

## **Part IV: A Program for the Future: The Implementation of Eugenic Policies and the End of the Movement**

### VIII. *Vermont's Sterilizations*

1. How did the Brandon School get consent to perform sterilizations? Do you think that these interviews count as consent?
2. What factors may have made someone a target for sterilization surgery?
3. What are some of the issues with the records of Vermont's sterilizations under the 1931 law?
4. How did personal narratives about Vermont eugenics change public opinion about the subject?

IX. *The Evolution of Vermont Eugenics*

1. What happened to American eugenics in the aftermath of World War II?
2. How did public opinion on state-run institutions shift in the postwar period? What caused these changes?
3. In 2023, sterilization is still legal in Vermont due to the court decision *In Re Marica R.* (1978). Due to medical confidentiality, we do not know how many people it affects today. How do we come to terms with a history that we are still trying to understand?
4. Although Vermont's government has never undertaken any study of the impact of eugenics (p. 175), this may be studied under the recently formed Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission. What questions would you have for such a study?
5. What steps has the state government of Vermont taken to recognize the long-term, intergenerational effects of the eugenics movement? What further actions do you think the state should take?

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## SECTION 2: DISCUSSING THE BOOK IN YOUR COMMUNITY

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It is often difficult to find the right approach to sharing and discussing painful historical events. Your community may have a direct connection to the history described in this book, or you may use the book to jumpstart discussions about difficult history in your own community. The following prompts and resources are intended to help you address difficult history at the local level.

### Your Community Experience

Your community may have history and experiences that directly align with the topics addressed in the book. Or there may be institutions, programs, or events that mirror these issues. A local approach to difficult history can be both advantageous and more complicated. Here is an outline of how you might begin:

- **Identify:** Work to build a list of events, institutions, people, or places that represent troubling or difficult history in your community. Remember to consult sources that represent different viewpoints.
  - Discussion question: How do you see your community reflected in this book?
- **Acknowledge:** At the local level, people may have experience, family, or opinions on different sides of an issue. Your own organization or group could even have its own complicated past. Acknowledging that a part of your community history, and sometimes individuals' roles in it, was difficult or painful is essential in building the complete story.
  - Discussion question: What are some of the ways in which the eugenics movement (and larger institutionalization and public policy movements addressed in the book) were negative or hurtful to different people or groups? Do you see those forces at play in your own community?
- **Contextualize and Reflect:** Part of history's value is to help contextualize and reflect both the localized and larger forces, cultural norms, and ethical considerations that shaped actions by individuals and institutions that we consider wrong today. Work to build a framework that puts these items into context and allows for reflection on that context.
  - Discussion question: What inequalities existed that led to who was targeted and how they were impacted by the eugenics movement? How did those same/similar inequalities impact your community?
- **Find Solutions for Today:** Another value in addressing difficult history is to be able to find solutions that help to address the problems of the past while building toward a more positive community experience in the future. It may help community members to see the value of discussing difficult history by placing it within this contemporary framework.
  - Discussion question: What are some of the contemporary ways Vermont has been reckoning with the hurt caused by the eugenics movement? How would reviewing and addressing difficult history in your community help you build a better future?

## Building Open Community Organizations

What viewpoints do you as an organization tend to favor when you talk about your community's past? How do exceptionalism, celebration, and pride take center stage in your community stories? You may need to do work within your group or organization to understand your own place in perpetuating historical harm before being able to constructively and openly discuss difficult history. This could include:

- Reviewing how your collections, exhibits, publications, etc., reflect (or don't reflect) these difficult stories.
- Exploring what approaches you might take to welcome new community members while acknowledging difficult pasts.
- Creating a robust list of who you need to include in discussions in order to build a broader, more diverse, and reflective community history.

## Alternatives to Open Discussions

It is sometimes hard to share difficult experiences in an open group setting. There are many other ways you can encourage interactive discussions and community sharing around these topics. These could include:

- Moderated online discussion boards and wikis
- Oral history/memoir projects
- Interactive community displays/exhibits
- Community art/expression projects

## References and Resources

[AASLH- Local Historians, Politics, and the Public Good](#)

[The Inclusive Historian](#)

[Interpreting Difficult History](#)



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## SECTION 3: MODERATING DIFFICULT DISCUSSIONS

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### Plan and prepare *before* the event.

#### Orient yourself to the discussion:

- Anticipate that people will come to the program with well-informed viewpoints and high expectations. The way in which the event moderator initiates and engages in a difficult conversation will set the tone for the rest of the discussion. Therefore, think about how you will model discussion from a place of respect, vulnerability, curiosity, and collaboration. Being flexible and responsive to the unfoldings within discussions is critical.
- Read the book in advance, organize possible discussion topics, and take notes with page numbers to connect the discussion directly to the text. In your facilitation notes, consider including:
  - Guideposts that help readers orient to themes presented in the book
  - Pre-selected passages that guide the group toward a particular discussion topic in relation to the major themes

#### Orient yourself to the space:

- Consider the limitations of and desires for the event space. As the moderator, will participants be able to see and hear you clearly? What equipment may be necessary for improved accessibility for participants?
- For smaller discussion groups, consider a seating structure that enables face-to-face conversation. If that is not possible, how will the room arrangement ensure that all those who wish to share are heard by others?

### Frame the event for participants *before* the discussion begins.

#### Orient the group to the event:

- Formally welcome participants attending the event. Beginning with “thank you” is always encouraged. “On behalf of (your organization) and the Vermont Historical Society, I want to thank you for coming to today’s discussion of Mercedes de Guardiola’s book, *“Vermont for the Vermonters.”*”
- A smile, eye contact, and relaxed body language help to make people feel welcome in the space.
- Share information pertinent to creature comforts (bathrooms, water fountains, etc.), the event’s length, and the event’s overarching goals.

Orient the group to each other:

- As the moderator, in response to the group size, you can determine the type of introduction that best fits the situation. Will you introduce yourself and other possible key speakers after welcoming participants to the event? If the group is smaller, will you ask each participant to introduce themselves?
- Introductions can range from the simple -- name and town -- to more complex. For instance, you could ask participants to share why they are interested in the program and what they hope to take away from the discussion.

Orient the group to discussion acknowledgments, expectations, and agreements:

- Acknowledge that it can be difficult when confronted with information that wrestles with what has been portrayed as historic fact, especially when it has become a part of a wider societal consciousness, or when it's deeply connected to one's own identity. Propose that discomfort acts as an invitation to sit with the intersectionality where new information meets old. Suggest that when explored through thoughtful inquiry, the framing of new information in wider contexts ultimately deepens comprehension of history overall. Agree that everyone is coming into this space as a learner, and that everyone is coming to this even at different points along a learning continuum.
- Advocate that everyone assumes good intentions of event attendees. If an individual says something that is offensive, consider that it is born from not knowing, and that harm is not intended. Recommend that the frictional moment be seen as an opportunity for education, instead of being an opportunity for shame or blame.
- Acknowledge that the discussion may lead to triggering topics, heated moments, and other kinds of emotional stress. Encourage the group to strive to ensure the safety of all those present in the space, while also acknowledging that safety can take time to foster. Therefore, propose that participants work together toward a space of harm reduction, centering those most affected by injustice in the room, even if it means decentering ourselves. Be clear with attendees about what you will do as moderator if escalation occurs.
- Leaning into challenging conversations is vital to deeper understanding, however, as the moderator you reserve the right to ask an attendee to leave if they engage in behaviors that reflect violence, discrimination, and/or dehumanization.

## Navigate *during* the discussion.

### Moderating Courageous Conversations:

#### Develops Awareness

- Group dynamics can be measured through quick scans of the room. By reading clues, including non-verbal cues (facial expression, body language, gestures, hand-raising, etc.), one can assess the emotional tone and overall energy of the room. How do the clues inform your approach to discussion facilitation, if at all?

#### Invites Participation

- Consider starting the discussion with clear, open-ended but bounded questions, inviting participants to make personal connections to the book. Lean on the notes that you've taken earlier for guidance. You may have a dynamic group that guides its own discussion, or you may have a group that expects you to direct the conversation. Be prepared either way.
  - Avoid “double-barreled” questions that pose two problems simultaneously, or “hide the ball” questions that search for a specific answer. Yes or no questions limit participants' ability to engage in thoughtful discussion.
- After someone has shared, if appropriate, model active listening by reflecting back what you heard to show that you value understanding their point: “I heard you say X. Did I understand you correctly?”
- Ask follow-up questions. A combination of initiating and probing questions can be an effective approach to draw out additional ideas.
- Reflective questions can help attendees reenter the dialogue when participation stagnates. Consider these questions:
  - What do you wish people knew about your thinking or feelings about this issue?
  - What question do you wish you could ask right now, but don't feel like you can?
  - What question do you wish someone else would ask you?
- Revisit past contributions to the discussion and connect them to new ideas shared.
- Invite people to process the feelings that have come up: “Take a moment, turn to someone near you, and take X minutes each to share whatever feelings or thoughts have come up for you. Try to hone in on your own responses, as opposed to focusing or reacting to those of another.”
- Sometimes there will be a natural lull in the discussion. Silence is not a problem. As one veteran facilitator notes: “letting the quiet ‘steep’ for a while can allow insights to arise and can permit someone who is hesitant to voice an opinion.” Make room for quiet and be ready to guide when necessary.

### Requires Modeling

- Be curious and open to other perspectives by practicing active listening. Lead by example by first recognizing your own privileges and biases, connecting new personal insights to specific passages from the book.

### Engages Participants Comfortably

- Counsel attendees to practice patient and active listening. Passion is often derived from deep care. Impatient interruption is often tied to someone desiring their perspective to be heard.
- Participation in the discussion, especially a difficult conversation, is a choice. Remember, no one should be made to discuss if they would prefer to sit and observe. Their presence is a form of engagement.
- If a group is not engaging in conversation, consider breaking into smaller units. Pose discussion topics or questions to the entire group and encourage participants to share in their smaller groups.
- Avoid asking attendees to speak on behalf of their entire identity group.

### Navigates Charged Moments

- If a challenging moment or offensive statement arises, there are some strategies that can ease the tension.
  - Acknowledge the emotions in the room
  - Acknowledge any damage or offense that some may be feeling
  - Humanize those who are affected
  - Ask clarifying questions, redirect and/or conclude that portion of the discussion

### Redirects Conversations

- Sometimes a discussion will veer from the stated goal. It's helpful to acknowledge that it happened before guiding the group back with a gentle reminder.
- Use this moment to remind attendees, without judgment, that it's natural for people to slip back into conversational habits and patterns. Engaging in dialogue with the purpose of deeper understanding sometimes requires recalibration.

### Frames "Sticky" Points

- As a challenging portion of the discussion ends, feel free to summarize and synthesize the main points made.
- If necessary, reiterate that definitive resolutions are not required before exploring other discussion topics.

## Concludes with Intention

- Leave participants with something to reflect on or question. In doing so, you may want to read a short passage from the book, or share a quotation or poem related to it.
- Ask for last thoughts, final comments, or unresolved issues. Have participants changed their mind about anything over the course of the discussion? Use the “sweep” method to give everyone the opportunity to speak.
- Thank everyone for attending.

## Repairing and recuperating after the discussion.

### Demonstrating Care for Yourself:

- Check in with yourself, first. Do a temperature check on your feelings.
  - What went well?
  - What didn't go well? Is further follow-up necessary?
  - What further learning lies ahead?
- If helpful, process or debrief with someone who has had experience navigating emotionally charged discussions.

### Demonstrating Care for Your Community:

- Check in with attendees, if necessary or appropriate.
- Don't make assumptions about what others are feeling. Ask open-ended questions and give them space to engage or not after the event's closure.
- Grow awareness.
  - Challenging conversations centered on identity and power can trigger past trauma. In some cases, it can be retraumatizing. Recuperation may require connecting with resources that support wellness and self-care.

## References and Resources

[Guide to Facilitating Challenging Conversations - Diversity & Inclusion Support | Montana State University](#)

[Brave Space Agreements](#)

[Facilitator Tips: Challenging Meetings — National Equity Project](#)

[Repeopling Vermont – Program Guide](#)