

# Eugenics on the Farm: Lewis Terman

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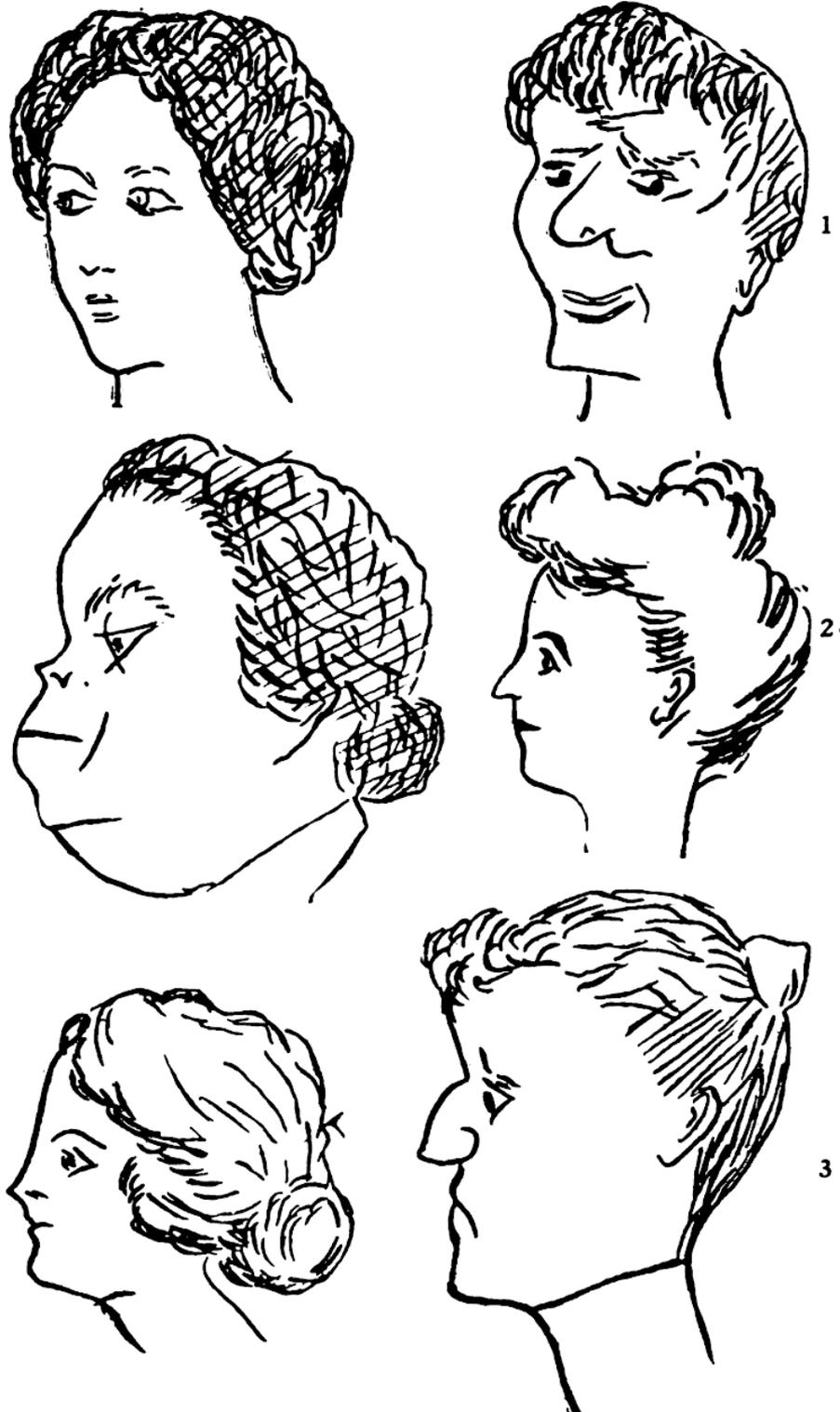


Lewis Madison Terman was born in 1877 in Indianapolis, Indiana. Deemed a precocious and bookish child, Terman claimed to have performed his first psychology experiment at age 11. He received his Ph.D. in psychology in 1905 before coming to Stanford University in 1910, where he stayed until his death in 1956. Terman is best known for developing the Stanford-Binet IQ test, a development which made both him and Stanford University well-known throughout the United States. Terman's interest in intelligence, however, was not — it was motivated and shaped by Terman's deep belief in eugenics.

Surpassed by perhaps only David Starr Jordan, Terman was the most influential Stanford eugenicist. He was a firm believer in attempts to improve the human race through selective and restrictive breeding. He joined and served as a high ranking member in many eugenic organizations (the Human Betterment Foundation, the American Eugenics Society, and the Eugenics Research Association), and worked alongside many others (such as the American Institute of Family Relations and the California Bureau of Juvenile Research). Terman was a central figure in the expanding network of American eugenicists in the early 20th century, a fact which can be seen clearly in his research interests. Terman's academic research as a psychologist was always linked to the furthering of his eugenic ideals. One of his major fields of study was gender and sexual deviance, as shown in his 1936 book "Sex and Personality: Studies in Masculinity and Femininity." In this text, Terman set out to quantify sexual deviancy, using tests and questionnaires to scientifically determine if an individual was sexually deviant, non-conforming to gender roles or a "potential homosexual." Two years later, Terman extended these findings and argued that marriages could only be successful when parents obeyed tradition gender roles, as he argued in his 1938 book "Psychological Factors in Marital Happiness." Terman, like many eugenicists, was dedicated to preserving the marriages of white Americans, promoting them to have eugenically fit children. In "Building a Better Race,"

historian Wendy Kline argues that Terman's motives behind both of these studies were rooted in eugenic thought. Terman did not just want to identify sexually deviant individuals: he aimed to promote the eugenic eradication of those who did not fit into his strict gender and sexual roles in the name of preserving the (white), happy heterosexual family.

But Terman's most famous contribution to both eugenic movements and society at large was the Stanford-Binet IQ test. Terman did not invent intelligence quotient tests. Many existed before him, with the most prevalent being the Binet IQ test. Developed by French psychologist Alfred Binet, the Binet IQ test mixed quantitative and qualitative methods because Binet viewed intelligence as too multifaceted to be expressed by numbers alone. Terman, however, held a more simplistic view of intelligence. For him, intelligence was an innate trait which could be quantified and acted according to Mendelian theories of inheritance. With this in mind, Terman revised Binet's test in his 1916 "The Measurement of Intelligence," in which he devised a quantifiable scale of intelligence from idiocy to feeble-mindedness to genius – all of which could be determined with a simple test.



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CLINIC is indebted for the loan of these cuts and those on p. 225 to the courtesy of Dr. Oliver P. Cornman, Associate Superintendent of Schools of Philadelphia, and Chairman of Committee on Backward Children Investigation. See Report of Committee, Dec. 31, 1910, appendix.

Early attempts to quantify intelligence included questions such as this one, in which test takers were asked to identify the “prettiest face.”

From its very conception, Terman’s Stanford-Binet IQ test had questionable applications. In “The Measurement of Intelligence,” Terman used his test to present an argument of IQ deficiency in Indigenous, Mexican, and Black communities, supporting theories of racial intelligence that other eugenicists, including Stanford’s own Leonas Burlingame, often embraced. He argued that the “dullness” of these communities were “racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come,” and that there were “significant racial differences in general intelligence.” As historian Alexandra Minna Stern examines in her book “Eugenic Nation,” contemporary researchers (mainly Terman’s own students) used the IQ test to determine the intellectual worth of Mexican immigrants and communities, often concluding that Mexicans were racially inferior. Terman’s test was also used regularly to determine who should be sterilized in the name of eugenics: individuals with an IQ of under 70 (deemed feeble-minded) were targeted for sterilization by the state, such as in the famous case of Carrie Buck. In the United States, over 600,000 people were sterilized by the state for eugenic reasons, often because of IQ test results. For many eugenicists, Terman’s research finally presented a way to efficiently and “objectively” judge the eugenic worth of human lives.

Even after Terman, IQ tests have been abused and misused for political and eugenic motives. Terman’s IQ test inspired similar aptitude tests, such as the SAT, which has been used historically and today to limit the quantity of marginalized people in the academy.

In recent years, theories of racial intelligence have resurged in popularity — one example is Charles Murray’s influential 1994 “The Bell Curve,” often used as an excuse for racist exclusionary practices based on some of the same faulty assumptions as Terman’s original theories.

Many have criticized the very idea of intelligence existing as a quantifiable and inherited value. Evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, for instance, in “The Mismeasurement of Man,” shows the flawed assumptions made in Terman’s belief in racial IQ and intelligence as an inheritable trait, showing instead that a) intelligence is far too complex to be understood as a Mendelian trait and that b) the IQ test likely does not measure intelligence (a rather abstract concept) at all. But even *if* intelligence could be quantifiably valued, Terman’s approach of ranking human ability, and the application of his methods in determining who was welcome in a eugenic society, would still be unacceptable. A number can never define the worth of a human being.

Lewis Madison Terman has the most complex legacy of the Stanford eugenicists. We, as “gifted” Stanford students, have a vested interest in believing in the value of IQ and quantifiable ability. We have a vested interest in upholding elite education institutions and in pretending that we are somehow more deserving of resources and prestige than anyone else. We have a vested interest in prolonging the myth that Stanford and other elite academies select only the best and the brightest. There is no building honoring Lewis Terman on Stanford’s campus. Terman Fountain is, as the administration is quick to point out, named after his son, esteemed engineer Frederick Terman. However, Stanford University, as an elite and exclusionary institution and a gatekeeper of knowledge, is perhaps the greatest monument to Lewis Terman.

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