Lewis Terman stands as both a pioneer and a controversial figure in the field of intelligence testing in the United States. Terman’s work on the second version of the Binet-Simon scale, which had been introduced in the United States in 1916 by the French psychologist Alfred Binet, led to a revised scale known as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale. The latter was considered to be the most successful among various versions available at the time, leading to Terman’s reputation as one of the leaders in the American intelligence testing movement. Terman’s work, along with that of others interested in intelligence testing, began to reform the way in which educators thought about students’ academic abilities and especially about what it meant to be gifted.

Terman’s contributions to the science of intelligence testing, including his attention to rigorous procedures for test development, norming, administration, and scoring, hold as true today as they did in the early 20th century. His support of hereditarian theories of intelligence and the related uses of intelligence testing in schools and society have, however, been the subject of much debate.

Terman’s interest in the study of intelligence is often traced to the story of an itinerant book peddler and phrenologist who visited his family’s farm in the late 1890s. Terman, the 12th of 14 children, was proclaimed by the visitor to possess a skull formation indicating strong mental powers and the likelihood of great success in life. At the age of 15, Terman left the family farm (he was born in central Indiana) to attend Central Normal College in Danville, Indiana. From there, he served as a teacher and principal, obtained a master’s degree from Indiana University, and was eventually encouraged to enter Clark University. At Clark, Terman received a fellowship and studied under the psychologist G. Stanley Hall, whose beliefs about social evolution theory were purported to have an enormous influence on Terman’s emerging views on the relationship between heredity and intelligence. Although Hall was not a proponent of the measurement of intellect, Terman became captivated with the potential use of such tests and began to work with his thesis advisor, Edmund C. Sanford, to develop tests designed to discriminate between “bright” and “dull” students.

Following his studies at Clark, Terman moved to California where, in 1910, he received a faculty appointment in education at Stanford University. He remained at Stanford, where he served as head of the Psychology Department, until his retirement in 1942. It was at Stanford that Terman came into his own as a researcher and leader in testing reform in the fields of education and psychology, primarily through his successful revision of the Binet-Simon scales that had been introduced to the United States in 1908 by Henry H. Goddard. Goddard and other researchers worked on various translations of the scale, but it was Terman’s 1916 revision that came to be considered the most comprehensive and well-known among the measures of intelligence available at that time.

Terman conducted extensive renorming of the original scales and added a number of new tests, with the result that the Stanford-Binet consisted of 90 tests and 16 alternatives, as compared to the 54 tests of the original Binet-Simon scale. The 1916 revision was published with an accompanying manual designed to ensure that test administration, scoring, and interpretation occurred under standardized conditions that resulted in the highest possible levels of objectivity. It also introduced a numerical index of intelligence that calculated intelligence on the basis of the ratio between an individual’s mental age and chronological age. The resulting “intelligence quotient” (IQ) had been devised by the German psychologist William Stern in 1912, but it was not until Terman’s introduction of IQ that the concept
became widely known in both academic and public circles in the United States.

Terman's views on intelligence have been the subject of much debate among both supporters and critics. He believed that innate intelligence could be accurately measured, that social class was a function of native intelligence rather than environmental factors, and that universal intelligence testing held promise as an efficient and objective approach for “tracking” children into homogeneously grouped educational and vocational programs. According to Terman, students considered to be of “superior intellect” should be educated separately in accelerated classrooms and programs. He saw this as a necessary condition for advancement in a democratic society. Indeed, Terman suggested that one of the most significant problems for democracy was how to adjust for the radically different IQ variances within and between races and nationality groups. From Terman's perspective, the leaders needed to come from the top quartile and especially the top 5% in order to ensure the advance of social, academic, and governmental entities.

In contrast, Terman described persons scoring in the lowest 15th or 20th percentiles on intelligence tests as “democracy's ballast.” Again, his proposal was to use intelligence testing as a means to classify and to provide separate educational and vocational systems for this group of children and adults, thereby avoiding increases in crime, poverty, and industrial inefficiency that he believed would likely result if these individuals were not identified and served accordingly.

Terman's views came under increasing scrutiny following his later work with Robert M. Yerkes on large-scale intelligence testing of the armed forces during World War I. Discussions of intelligence that had been largely confined to psychologists and educators came into the public purview as both the technical and philosophical underpinnings of intelligence testing were questioned. The emerging “nature versus nurture” argument continued when potential flaws in intelligence tests were implicated in debates about the degree to which patterns and variations in intelligence could be ascribed to specific racial and ethnic groups. Terman, who had advocated for the use of intelligence testing as a way to strengthen a democratic society, now faced critics such as William C. Bagley of Teachers College, Columbia University, who argued that testing was being used unfairly to increase the opportunities of some social classes at the expense of others, thereby perpetuating an already unjust social order.

In considering Terman's contributions to testing reform in education, it seems important to view him within his particular historical context: a time marked by the rise of industrialism, optimism about the potential for advancements in psychology and science, and a belief in the power of objective and rational thinking to lead to a more efficient and orderly society. There is little doubt that the reform advancements he made with respect to the technical aspects of the measurement of intelligence have been, in many respects, positive and enduring. In the end, it may be most important to revisit his assumptions to carefully evaluate contemporary notions of intelligence and intelligence testing. It would seem wise to examine the ways in which current beliefs and practices—including homogeneous grouping in schools, large-scale group achievement testing, and commonly held beliefs about the “innateness” of intelligence—may be reminiscent of aspects of his work.

See also
Achieve, Inc., ACT and SAT Tests, Educational Testing Service (ETS), Intelligence Testing, Standardized Tests, Testing Students

Further Readings

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